RUTH FIELDING DOWN IN DIXIE

ALICE B. EMERSON

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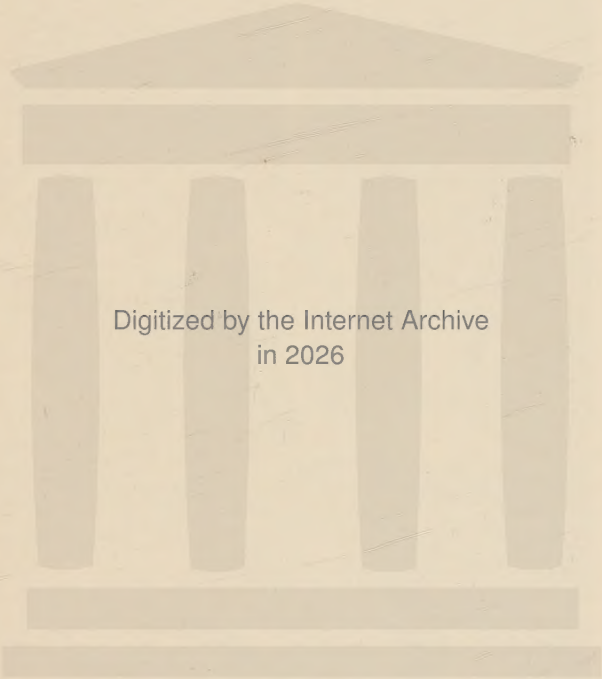
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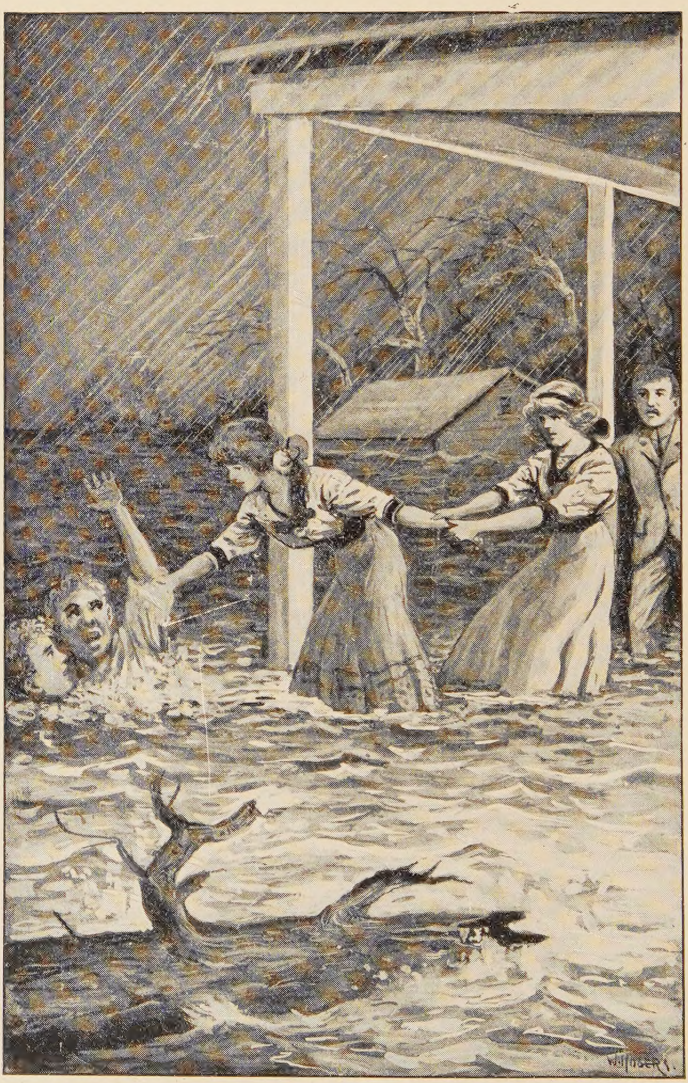

RUTH SECURED A GRIP ON THE BLACK MAN'S SLEEVE.

Ruth Fielding Down in Dixie

Ruth Fielding Down In Dixie

OR

GREAT TIMES IN THE LAND OF COTTON

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING AND THE GYPSIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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Books for Girls

BY ALICE B. EMERSON

RUTH FIELDING SERIES

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RUTH FIELDING DOWN IN DIXIE
Or, Great Times in the Land of Cotton.

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RUTH FIELDING DOWN IN DIXIE
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RUTH FIELDING DOWN IN DIXIE

CHAPTER I

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

"Isn't that the oddest acting girl you ever saw, Ruth?"

"Goodness! what a gawky thing!" agreed Ruth Fielding, who was just getting out of the taxicab, following her chum, Helen Cameron.

"And those white-stitched shoes!" gasped Helen. "Much too small for her, I do believe!"

"How that skirt does hang!" exclaimed Ruth.

"She looks just as though she had slept in all her clothes," said Helen, giggling. "What do you suppose is the matter with her, Ruth?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Ruth Fielding said. "She's going on this boat with us, I guess. Maybe we can get acquainted with her," and she laughed.

"Excuse *me!*" returned Helen. "I don't think I care to. Oh, look!"

The girl in question—who was odd looking, indeed—had been paying the cabman who had brought her to the head of the dock. The dock was on West Street, New York City, and the

chums from Cheslow and the Red Mill had never been in the metropolis before. So they were naturally observant of everything and everybody about them.

The strange girl, after paying her fare, started to thrust her purse into the shabby handbag she carried. Just then one of the colored porters hurried forward and took up the suitcase that the girl had set down on the ground at her feet when she stepped from the cab.

"Right dis way, miss," said the porter politely, and started off with the suitcase.

"Hey! what are you doing?" demanded the girl in a sharp and shrill voice; and she seized the handle of the bag before the porter had taken more than a step.

She grabbed it so savagely and gave it such a determined jerk, that the porter was swung about and almost thrown to the ground before he could let go of the handle.

"I'll 'tend to my own bag," said this vigorous young person, and strode away down the dock, leaving the porter amazed and the bystanders much amused.

"My goodness!" gasped the negro, when he got his breath. "Dat gal is as strong as a ox—sho' is! I nebber seed her like. *She* don't need no he'p, *she* don't."

"Let him take our bags—poor fellow," said

Helen, turning around after paying their own driver. "Wasn't that girl rude?"

"Here," said Ruth, laughing and extending her light traveling bag to the disturbed porter, "you may carry *our* bags to the boat. We're not as strong as that girl."

"She sho' was a strong one," said the negro, grinning. "I declar' for't, missy! I ain' nebber seed no lady so strong befo'."

"Isn't he delicious?" whispered Helen, pinching Ruth's arm as they followed the man down the dock. "*He's* no Northern negro. Why, he sounds just as though we were as far as Virginia, at least, already! Oh, my dear! our fun has begun."

"I feel awfully important," admitted Ruth. "And I guess you do. Traveling alone all the way from Cheslow to New York."

"And this city *is* so big," sighed Helen. "I hope we can stop and see it when we come back from the Land of Cotton."

They were going aboard the boat that would take them down the coast of New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia to the Capes of Virginia and Old Point Comfort. There they were to meet their Briarwood Hall schoolmate, Nettie Parsons, and her aunt, Mrs. Rachel Parsons.

The girls and their guide passed a gang of stevedores rushing the last of the freight aboard the boat, their trucks making a prodigious rumbling.

They came to the passenger gangway along which the porter led them aboard and to the purser's office. There he waited, clinging to the bags, until the ship's officer had looked at their tickets and stateroom reservation, and handed them the key.

"Lemme see dat, missy," said the porter to Ruth. "I done know dis boat like a book, I sho' does."

"And, poor fellow, I don't suppose he ever looked inside a book," whispered Helen. "Isn't he comical?"

Ruth was afraid the porter would hear them talking about him, so she fell back until the man with the bags was some distance ahead. He was leading them to the upper saloon deck. Their reservation, which Tom Cameron, Helen's twin brother, had telegraphed for, called for an outside stateroom, forward, on this upper deck—a pleasantly situated room.

Tom could not come with his sister and her chum, for he was going into the woods with some of his school friends; but he was determined that the girls should have good accommodations on the steamboat to Old Point Comfort and Norfolk.

"And he's just the best boy!" Ruth declared, fumbling in her handbag as they viewed the cozy stateroom. "Oh! here's Mrs. Sadoc Smith's letter."

Helen had tipped the grinning darkey royally and he had shuffled out. She sat down now on the edge of the lower berth. This was the first time the chums had ever been aboard a boat for over night, and the "close comforts" of a stateroom were quite new to Helen and Ruth.

"What a dinky little washstand," Helen said. "Oh, my! Ruth, see the icewater pitcher and tumblers in the rack. Guess they expect the boat to pitch a good deal. Do you suppose it will be rough?"

"Don't know. Listen to this," Ruth said shortly, reading the letter which she had opened. "I only had a chance to glance at Mrs. Smith's letter before we started. Just listen here: She says Curly has got into trouble."

"Curly?" cried Helen, suddenly interested. "Never! What's he done now?"

"I guess this isn't any fun," said Ruth, seriously. "His grandmother is greatly disturbed. The constable has been to the house looking for Curly and threatens to arrest him."

"The poor boy!" exclaimed Helen. "I knew he was an awful cut-up——"

"But there never was an ounce of meanness in Henry Smith!" Ruth declared, quite excited. "I don't believe it can be as bad as she thinks."

"His grandmother has always been so strict with him," said Helen. "You know how she treated

him while we were lodging with her when the new West Dormitory at Briarwood was being built."

"I remember very clearly," agreed Ruth. "And, after all, Curly wasn't such a bad fellow. Mrs. Smith says he threatens to run away. *That* would be awful."

"Goodness! I believe I'd run away myself," said Helen, "if I had anybody who nagged me as Mrs. Sadoc Smith does Henry."

"And she doesn't mean to. Only she doesn't like boys—nor understand them," Ruth said, as she folded the letter with a sigh. "Poor Curly!"

"Come on! let's get out on deck and see them start. I do just long to see the wonderful New York skyline that everybody talks about."

"And the tall buildings that we couldn't see from the taxicab window," added Ruth.

"Who's going to keep the key?" demanded Helen, as Ruth locked the stateroom door.

"*I* am. You're not to be trusted, young lady," laughed Ruth. "Where's your handbag?"

"Why—I left it inside."

"With all that money in it? Smart girl! And the window blind is not locked. The rules say never to leave the room without locking the window or the blind."

"I'll fix *that*," declared Helen, and reached in to slide the blind shut. They heard the catch snap and were satisfied.

As they went through the passage from the outer deck to the saloon they saw a figure stalking ahead of them which made Helen all but cry out.

"I see her," Ruth whispered. "It's the same girl."

"And she's going into that stateroom," added Helen, as the person unlocked the door of an inside room.

"I'd like to see her face," Ruth said, smiling. "I see she has curly hair, and I believe it's short."

"We'll look her up after the steamboat gets off. Her room is number forty-eight," Helen said. "Come on, dear! Feel the jar of the engines? They must be casting off the hawsers."

The girls went up another flight of broad, polished stairs and came out upon the hurricane deck. They were above the roof of the dock and could look down upon it and see the people bidding their friends on the boat good-bye while the vessel backed out into the stream. The starting was conducted with such precision that they heard few orders given, and only once did the engineroom gong clang excitedly.

The steamer soon swung its stern upstream, and the bow came around, clearing the end of the pier next below, and so heading down the North River. Certain tugboats and wide ferries tooted their defiance at the ocean-going craft, for the vessel on which Ruth and Helen were traveling

was one of the largest coast-wise steamers sailing out of the port.

It was a lovely afternoon toward the close of June. The city had been as hot as a roasting pan, Helen said; but on the high deck the breeze, breathed from the Jersey hills, lifted the damp locks from the girls' brows. A soft mist crowned the Palisades. The sun, already descending, drew another veil before his face as he dropped behind the Orange Mountains, his red rays glistening splendidly upon the towers and domes of lower Broadway.

They passed the Battery in a few minutes, with the round, pot-bellied aquarium and the immigration offices. The upper bay was crowded with craft of all kind. The Staten Island ferries drummed back and forth, the perky little ferryboat to Ellis Island and the tugboat to the Statue of Liberty crossed their path. In their wake the small craft dipped in the swell of the propeller's turmoil.

The Statue of Liberty herself stood tall and stately in the afternoon sunlight, holding her green, bronze torch aloft. The girls could not look at this monument without being impressed by its stateliness and noble features.

"And we've read about it, and thought so much about this present of Miss Picolet's nation to ours! It is very wonderful," Ruth said.

"And that fort! See it?" cried Helen, pointing to Governor's Island on the other bow. "Oh, and see, Ruth! that great, rusty, iron steamship anchored out yonder. She must be a great, sea-going tramp."

Every half minute there was something new for the chums to exclaim over.

In fifteen minutes they were passing through the Narrows. The two girls were staring back at Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island, when a petty officer above on the lookout post hailed the bridge amidships.

"Launch coming up, sir. Port, astern."

There was a sudden rush of those passengers in the bows who heard to the port side. "Oh, come on. Let's see!" cried Helen, and away the two girls went with the crowd.

The perky little launch shoved up close to the side of the tall steamer. It flew a pennant which the girls did not understand; but some gentleman near them said laughingly:

"That is a police launch. I guess we're all arrested. See! they're coming aboard."

The steamer did not slow down at all; but one of the men in the bow of the pitching launch threw a line with a hook on the end of it, and this fastened itself over the rail of the lower deck. By leaning over the rail above Ruth and Helen could see all that went on below.

In a moment deckhands caught the line and hauled up with it a rope ladder. This swung perilously—so the girls thought—over the green-and-white leaping waves.

A man started up the swinging ladder. The steamer dipped ever so little and he scrambled faster to keep out of the water's reach.

"The waves act just like hungry wolves, or like dogs, leaping after their prey," said Ruth reflectively. "See them! They almost caught his legs that time."

Another man started up the ladder the moment the first one had swarmed over the rail. Then another came, and a fourth. Four men in all boarded the still fast-moving steamer. Everybody was talking eagerly about it, and nobody knew what it meant.

These men were surely not passengers who had been belated, for the launch still remained attached to the steamer.

Ruth and Helen went back into the saloon. There they saw their smiling porter, now in the neat black dress of a waiter, bustling about. "Any little t'ing I kin do fo' yo', missy?" he asked.

"No, thank you," Ruth replied, smiling. But Helen burst out with: "Do tell us what those men have come aboard for?"

"Dem men from de *po*-lice launch?" inquired the black man.

"Yes. What are they after? Are they police?"

"Ya-as'm. Dem's *po*-lice," said the darkey, rolling his eyes. "Dey tell me dey is wantin' a boy wot's been stealin'—an' he's done got girl's clo'es on, missy."

"A boy in girl's clothing?" gasped Ruth.

"'A wolf in sheep's clothing!'" laughed her chum.

"Ya-as indeedy, missy. Das wot dey say."

"Are they *sure* he came aboard this boat?" asked Ruth anxiously.

"Sho is, missy. Dey done trailed him right to de dock. Das wot de head steward heard 'em say. De taxicab man remembered him—he acted so funny in dem girl's clo'es—he, he, he! Das one silly trick, das wot *dat* is," chuckled the darkey. "No boy gwine t' look like his sister in her clo'es—no, indeedy."

But Ruth and Helen were now staring at each other with the same thought in their minds. "Oh, Helen!" murmured Ruth. And, "Oh, Ruth!" responded Helen.

"Ought we to tell?" pursued Helen, putting all the burden of deciding the question on her chum as usual. "It's that very strange looking girl we saw going into number forty-eight; isn't it?"

"It is most certainly that person," agreed Ruth positively.

CHAPTER II

THE WORM TURNS

RUTH FIELDING was plentifully supplied with good sense. Under ordinary circumstances she would not have tried to shield any person who was a fugitive from justice.

But in this case there seemed to her no reason for Helen and her to volunteer information—especially when such information as they might give was based on so infirm a foundation. They had seen an odd looking girl disappear into one of the staterooms. They had really nothing more than a baseless conclusion to back up the assertion that the individual in question was disguised, or was the boy wanted by the police.

Of course, whatever Ruth said was best, and Helen would agree to it. The latter had learned long since that her chum was gifted with judgment beyond her years, and if she followed Ruth Fielding's lead she would not go far wrong.

Indeed, Helen began to admire her chum soon after Ruth first appeared at Jabez Potter's Red Mill, on the banks of the Lumano, near which

Helen's father had built his all-year-around home. Ruth had come to the old Red Mill as a "charity child." At least, that is what miserly Jabez Potter considered her. Nor was he chary at first of saying that he had taken his grand-niece in because there was no one else to whom she could go.

Young as she then was, Ruth felt her position keenly. Had it not been for Aunt Alvirah (who was nobody's relative, but everybody's aunt), whom the miller had likewise "taken in out of charity" to keep house for him and save the wages of a housekeeper, Ruth would never have been able to stay at the Red Mill. Her uncle's harshness and penurious ways mortified the girl, and troubled her greatly as time went on.

Ruth succeeded in finding her uncle's cashbox that had been stolen from him at the time a freshet carried away a part of the old mill. These introductory adventures are told in the initial volume of the series, called: "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; or, Jacob Parloe's Secret."

Because he felt himself in Ruth's debt, her Uncle Jabez agreed to pay for her first year's tuition and support at a girls' boarding school to which Mr. Cameron was sending Helen. Helen was Ruth's dearest friend, and the chums, in the second volume, "Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall," entered school life hand in hand, making friends and rivals alike, and having adventures galore.

The third volume took Ruth and her friends to Snow Camp, a winter lodge in the Adirondack wilderness. The fourth tells of their summer adventures at Lighthouse Point on the Atlantic Coast. The fifth book deals with the exciting times the girls and their boy friends had with the cowboys at Silver Ranch, out in Montana. The sixth story is about Cliff Island and its really wonderful caves, and what was hidden in them. Number seven relates the adventures of a "safe and sane" Fourth of July at Sunrise Farm and the rescue of the Raby orphans. While "Ruth Fielding and the Gypsies," the eighth volume of the series, relates a very important episode in Ruth's career; for by restoring a valuable necklace to an aunt of one of her school friends she obtains a reward of five thousand dollars.

This money, placed to Ruth's credit in the bank by Mr. Cameron, made the girl of the Red Mill instantly independent of Uncle Jabez, who had so often complained of the expense Ruth was to him. Much to Aunt Alvirah's sorrow, Uncle Jabez became more exacting and penurious when Ruth's school expenses ceased to trouble him.

"I could almost a-wish, my pretty, that you hadn't got all o' that money, for Jabe Potter was l'arnin' to let go of a dollar without a-squeezin' all the tailfeathers off the eagle that's onto it," said the rheumatic, little, old woman. "Oh, my back!

and oh, my bones! It's nice for you to have your own livin' pervided for, Ruthie. But it's awful for Jabez Potter to get so selfish and miserly again."

Aunt Alvirah had said this to the girl of the Red Mill just before Ruth started for Briarwood Hall at the opening of her final term at that famous school. In the story immediately preceding the present narrative, "Ruth Fielding in Moving Pictures; Or, Helping the Dormitory Fund," Ruth and her school chums were much engaged in that modern wonder, the making of "movie" films. Ruth herself had written a short scenario and had had it accepted by Mr. Hammond, president of the Alectrion Film Corporation, when one of the school dormitories was burned. To help increase the fund for a new structure, the girls all desired to raise as much money as possible.

Ruth was inspired to write a second scenario—a five-reel drama of schoolgirl life—and Mr. Hammond produced it for the benefit of the Hall. "The Heart of a Schoolgirl" made a big hit and brought Ruth no little fame in her small world.

With Helen and the other girls who had been so close to her during her boarding school life, Ruth Fielding had now graduated from Briarwood Hall. Nettie Parsons and her Aunt Rachel had invited the girl of the Red Mill and Helen Cameron to go South for a few weeks following their graduation; and the two chums were now on their

way to meet Mrs. Rachel Parsons and Nettie at Old Point Comfort. And from this place their trip into Dixie would really begin.

Ruth had stated positively her belief that the odd looking girl they had seen going into the stateroom numbered forty-eight was the disguised boy the police were after. But belief is not conviction, after all. They had no proof of the identity of the person in question.

"So, why should we interfere?" said Ruth, quietly. "We don't know the circumstances. Perhaps he's only accused."

"I wish we could have seen his face," said Helen. "I'd like to know what kind of looking girl he made. Remember when Curly Smith dressed up in Ann Hick's old frock and hat that time?"

"Yes," said Ruth, smiling. "But Curly looks like a girl when he's dressed that way. If his hair were long and he learned to walk better——"

"That girl we saw going into the stateroom was about Curly's size," said Helen reflectively.

"Poor Curly!" said Ruth. "I hope he is not in any serious trouble. It would really break his grandmother's heart if he went wrong."

"I suppose she does love him," observed Helen. "But she is so awfully strict with him that I wonder the boy doesn't run away again. He did when he was a little kiddie, you know."

"Yes," said Ruth, smiling. "His famous revolt against kilts and long curls. You couldn't really blame him."

However, the girls were not particularly interested in the fate of Henry Smith just then. They did not wish to lose any of the sights outside, and were just returning to the open deck when they saw a group of men hurrying through the saloon toward the bows. With the group Ruth and Helen recognized the purser who had viséd their tickets. One or two of the other men, though in citizen's dress, were unmistakably policemen.

"Here's the room," said the purser, stopping suddenly, and referring to the list he carried. "I remember the person well. I couldn't say he didn't look like a young girl; but she—or he—was peculiar looking. Ah! the door's locked."

He rattled the knob. Then he knocked. Helen seized Ruth's hand. "Oh, see!" she cried. "It *is* forty-eight."

"I see it is. Poor fellow," murmured Ruth.

"If she *is* a fellow."

"And what will happen if he is a girl?" laughed Ruth.

"Won't she be mad!" cried Helen.

"Or terribly embarrassed," Ruth added.

"Here," said one of the police officers, "he may be in there. By your lief, Purser," and he suddenly put his knee against the door below the lock,

pressed with all his force, and the door gave way with a splintering of wood and metal.

The officer plunged into the room, his comrades right behind him. Quite a party of spectators had gathered in the saloon to watch. But there was nobody in the stateroom.

"The bird's flown, Jim," said one policeman to another.

"Hullo!" said the purser. "What's that in the berth?"

He picked up a dress, skirt, and hat. Ruth and Helen remembered that they were like those that the strange looking girl had worn. One of the policemen dived under the berth and brought forth a pair of high, fancy, laced shoes.

"He's dumped his disguise here," growled an officer. "Either he went ashore before the boat sailed, or he's in his proper clothes again. Say! it would take us all night, Jim, to search this steamer."

"And we're not authorized to go to the Capes with her," said the policeman who had been addressed as Jim. "We'd better go back and report, and let the inspector telegraph to Old Point a full description. Maybe the dicks there can nab the lad."

The stateroom door was closed, but could not be locked again. The purser and policemen went away, and the girls ran out on deck to see the

police officers go down the ladder and into the launch.

They all did this without accident. Then the rope ladder was cast off and the launch chugged away, turning back toward the distant city.

The steamer had now passed Romer Light and Sandy Hook and was through the Ambrose Channel. The Scotland Lightship, courtesying to the rising swell, was just ahead. Ruth and Helen had never seen a lightship before and they were much interested in this drab, odd looking, short-masted vessel on which a crew lived month after month, and year after year, with only short respites ashore.

"I should think it would be dreadfully lonely," Helen said, with reflection. "Just to tend the lights—and the fish, perhaps—eh?"

"I don't suppose they have dances or have people come to afternoon tea," giggled Ruth. "What do you expect?"

"Poor men! And no ladies around. Unless they have mermaids visit them," and Helen chuckled too. "Wouldn't it be fun to hire a nice big launch—a whole party of us Briarwood girls, for instance—and sail out there and go aboard that lightship? Wouldn't the crew be surprised to see us?"

"Maybe," said Ruth seriously, "they wouldn't let us aboard. Maybe it's against the rules. Or

perhaps they only select men who are misanthropes, or women-haters, to tend lightships."

"*Are* there such things as women-haters?" demanded Helen, big-eyed and innocent looking. "I thought *they* were fabled creatures—like—like mermaids, for instance."

"Goodness! Do you think, Helen Cameron, that every man you meet is going to fall on his knees to you?"

"No-o," confessed Helen. "That is, not unless I push him a little, weeny bit! And that reminds me, Ruthie. You ought to see the great bunch of roses Tom had the gardener cut yesterday to send to some girl. Oh, a barrel of 'em!"

"Indeed?" asked Ruth, a faint flush coming into her cheek. "Has Tom a crush on a new girl? I thought that Hazel Gray, the movie queen, had his full and complete attention?"

"How you talk!" cried Helen. "I suppose Tom will have a dozen flames before he settles down——"

Ruth suddenly burst into laughter. She knew she had been foolish for a moment.

"What nonsense to talk so about a boy in a military school!" she cried. "Why! he's only a boy yet."

"Yes, I know," sighed Helen, speaking of her twin reflectively. "He's merely a child. Isn't it funny how much older we are than Tom is?"

"Goodness me!" gasped Ruth, suddenly seizing her chum by the arm.

"O-o-o! ouch!" responded Helen. "What a grip you've got, Ruth! What's the matter with you?"

"See there!" whispered Ruth, pointing.

She had turned from the rail. Behind them, and only a few feet away, was the row of staterooms of which their own was one. Near by was a passage from the outer deck to the saloon, and from the doorway of this passage a person was peeping in a sly and doubtful way.

"Goodness!" whispered Helen. "Can—can it be?"

The figure in the doorway was lean and tall. Its gown hung about its frame as shapelessly as though the frock had been hung upon a clothespole! The face of the person was turned from the two girls; but Ruth whispered:

"It's that boy they were looking for."

"Oh, Ruth! Can it be possible?" Helen repeated.

"See the short hair?"

"Of course!"

"Oh!"

The Unknown had turned swiftly and disappeared into the passage. "Come on!" cried Helen. "Let's see where he goes to."

Ruth was nothing loath. Although she would

not have told anybody of their discovery, she was very curious. If the disguised boy had left his first disguise in stateroom forty-eight, he had doubly misled his pursuers, for he was still in women's clothing.

"Oh, dear me!" whispered Helen, as the two girls crowded into the doorway, each eager to be first. "I feel just like a regular detective."

"How do you know how a regular detective feels?" demanded Ruth, giggling. "Those detectives who came aboard just now did not look as though they felt very comfortable. And one of them chewed tobacco!"

"Horrors!" cried Helen. "Then I feel like the detective of fiction. I am sure *he* never chews tobacco."

"There! there she is!" breathed Ruth, stopping at the exit of the passage where they could see a good portion of the saloon.

"Come on! we mustn't lose sight of her," said Helen, with determination.

The awkward figure of the supposedly disguised boy was marching up the saloon and the girls almost ran to catch up with it.

"Do you suppose he will *dare* go to room forty-eight again?" whispered Ruth.

"And like enough they are watching that room."

"Well—see there!"

The person they were following suddenly

wheeled around and saw them. Ruth and Helen were so startled that they stopped, too, and stared in return. The face of the person in which they were so interested was a rather grim and unpleasant face. The cheeks were hollow, the short hair hung low on the forehead and reached only to the collar of the jacket behind. There were two deep wrinkles in the forehead over the high arched nose. Although the person had on no spectacles, the girls were positive that the eyes that peered at them were near-sighted.

"Why we should refer to her as *she,* when without doubt she is a *he,* I do not know," said Helen, in a whisper, to Ruth.

The Unknown suddenly walked past them and sought a seat on one of the divans. The girls sat near, where they could keep watch of her, and they discussed quite seriously what they should do.

"I wish I could hear its voice," whispered Ruth. "Then we might tell something more about it."

"But we heard him speak on the dock—don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes! when he almost knocked that poor colored man down."

"Yes. And his voice was just a squeal then," said Helen. "He tried to disguise it, of course."

"While now," added Ruth, chuckling, "he is as silent as the Sphinx."

The stranger was busy, just the same. A shabby handbag had been opened and several pamphlets and folders brought forth. The near-sighted eyes were made to squint nervously into first one of these folders and then another, and finally there were several laid out upon the seat about the Unknown.

Suddenly the Unknown looked up and caught the two chums staring frankly in the direction of "his, her, or its" seat. Red flamed into the sallow cheeks, and gathering up the folders hastily, the person crammed them into the bag and then started up to make her way aft. But Ruth had already seen the impoliteness of their actions.

"Do let us go away, Helen," she said. "We have no right to stare so."

She drew Helen down the saloon on the starboard side; it seems that the Unknown stalked down the saloon on the other. The chums and the strange individual rounded the built-up stairwell of the saloon at the same moment and came face to face again.

"Well, I want to know!" exclaimed the Unknown suddenly, in a viperish voice. "What do you girls mean? Are you following me around this boat? And what for, I'd like to know?"

"There!" murmured Ruth, with a sigh. "The worm has turned. We're in for it, Helen—and we deserve it!"

CHAPTER III

THE BOY IN THE MOONLIGHT

A MISTAKE could scarcely be made in the sex of the comical looking individual at whom the chums had been led to stare so boldly, when once they heard the voice. That shrill, sharp tone could never have come from a male throat. Now, too, the Unknown drew a pair of spectacles from her bag, adjusted them, and glared at Ruth and Helen.

"I want to know," repeated the woman sternly, "what you mean by following me around this boat?"

The chums were tongue-tied in their embarrassment for the moment, but Helen managed to blurt out: "We—we didn't know——"

She was on the verge of making a bad matter worse, by saying that they didn't know the lady was a lady! But Ruth broke in with:

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I am sure. We did not mean to offend you. Won't you forgive us, if you think we were rude? I am sure we did not intend to be."

It would have been hard for most people to re-

sist Ruth's mildness and her pleading smile. This person with the spectacles and the short hair was not moved by the girl of the Red Mill at all. Later Ruth and Helen understood why not.

"I don't want any more of your impudence!" the stern woman said. "Go away and leave me alone. I'd like to have the training of all such girls as you. *I'd* teach you what's what!"

"And I believe she would," gasped Helen, as she and Ruth almost ran back up to the saloon deck again. "Goodness! she is worse than Miss Brokaw ever thought of being—and we thought *her* pretty sharp at times."

"I wonder what and who the woman is," Ruth murmured. "I am glad she is nobody whom I have to know."

"Hope we have seen the last of the hateful old thing!"

But they had not. As the girls walked forward through the saloon and approached the spot where they had sat watching the mysterious woman with the short hair and the shorter temper, a youth got up from one of the seats and strolled out upon the deck ahead of them. Ruth started, and turned to look at Helen.

"My dear!" she said. "Did you see *that?*"

"Don't point out any other mysteries to me—please!" cried Helen. "We'll get into a worse pickle."

"But did you see that boy?" insisted Ruth.

"No. I'm not looking for boys."

"Neither am I," Ruth returned. "But I could not help seeing how much that one resembled Curly Smith."

"Dear me! You certainly have Henry Smith on the brain," cried Helen.

"Well, I can't help thinking of the poor boy. I hope we shall hear from his grandmother again. I am going to write and mail the letter just as soon as we reach Old Point Comfort."

The girls had walked slowly on, past the seat where the odd looking woman whom they had watched had sat down to examine the contents of her handbag. There were few other passengers about, for as the evening closed in almost everybody had sought the open deck.

Suddenly, from behind them, came a sound which seemed to be a cross between a steam whistle gone mad and the clucking of an excited hen. Ruth and Helen turned in amazement and saw the lank, mannish figure of the strange woman flying up the saloon.

"Stop them! Come back! My ticket!" were the words which finally became coherent as the strange individual reached the vicinity of the girl chums. An officer who was passing through happened to be right beside the two girls when the excited woman reached them.

She apparently had the intention of seizing hold upon Ruth and Helen, and the friends, startled, shrank back. The ship's officer promptly stepped in between the girls and the excited person with the short hair.

"Wait a moment, madam," he said sharply. "What is it all about?"

"My ticket!" cried the short-haired woman, glaring through her spectacles at Ruth and Helen.

"Your ticket?" said the officer. "What about it?"

"It isn't there!" and she pointed tragically to the seat on which she had previously rested.

"Did you leave it there?" queried the officer, guessing at the reason for h[illegible]citement.

"I just did, sir!" [illegible]n woman.

"Your ticke[illegible]lk?"

"No, it isn't. It's [illegible]ailroad trip from Norfolk t[illegible]eston. I had it folded in one of those Southern Railroad Company's folders. And now it isn't in my bag."

"Well?" said the officer calmly. "I apprehend that you left the folder on this seat—or think you did?"

"I know I did," declared the excited woman. "Those girls were following me around in a most impudent way; and they were right here when I got up and forgot that folder."

"The inference being, then," went on the of-

ficer, "that they took the folder and the ticket?"

"Yes, sir, I am convinced they did just that," declared the woman, glaring at the horrified Ruth and Helen.

Said the latter, angrily: "Why, the mean old thing! Who ever heard the like?"

"Oh, I know girls through and through!" snapped the strange woman. "I should think I ought to by this time—after fifteen years of dealing with the minxes. I could see that those two were sly and untrustworthy, the instant I saw them."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Nasty cat!" muttered Helen.

The officer was not greatly impressed. "Have you any real evidence connecting these young ladies with the loss of your ticket?" he asked.

"I say it's stolen!" cried the sharp-voiced one.

"And it may, instead, have been picked up, folder and all, by a quite different party. Perhaps the purser already has your lost ticket——"

At that moment the purser himself appeared, coming up the saloon. Behind him were two of the under stewards burdened with magnificent bunches of roses. A soft voice appealed at Ruth's elbow:

"If missy jes' let me take her stateroom key, den all dem roses be 'ranged in dar mos' skillful—ya-as'm; mos' skillful."

"Why! did you ever!" gasped Helen, amazed.

"Those are never for *us?*" cried Ruth.

"You are Miss Cameron?" asked the smiling purser of Ruth's chum. "These flowers came at the last moment by express for you and your friend. In getting under way they were overlooked; but the head stewardess opened the box and rearranged the roses, and I am sure they have not been hurt. Here is the card—Mr. Thomas Cameron's compliments."

"Oh, the dear!" cried Helen, clasping her hands.

"*Those* were the roses you thought he sent to Hazel Gray," whispered Ruth sharply.

"So they are!" cried Helen. "What a dunce I was. Of course, old Tom would not forget us. He's a good, good boy!"

She ran ahead to the stateroom. Ruth turned to see what had happened to the woman who thought they had taken her railroad ticket. The deck officer had turned her over to the purser and it was evident that the latter was in for an unpleasant quarter of an hour.

The roses seemed fairly to fill the stateroom, there were so many of them. The girls preferred to arrange them themselves; so the three porters left after having been tipped.

The chums opened the blind again so that they could look out across the water at the Jersey shore.

Sandy Hook was now far behind them. Long Branch and the neighboring seaside resorts were likewise passed.

The girls watched the shore with its ever varying scenes until past six o'clock and many of the passengers had gone into the dining saloon. Ruth and Helen finally went, too. They saw nothing of the unpleasant woman whose ire had been so roused against them; but after they came up from dinner, and the orchestra was playing, and the Brigantine Buoy was just off the port bow, the girls saw somebody else who began to interest them deeply.

The moon was coming up, and its silvery rays whitened everything upon deck. The girls sat for a while in the open stern deck watching the water and the lights. It was very beautiful indeed.

It was Helen who first noticed the figure near, with his back to them and with his head upon the arm that rested on the steamer's rail. She nudged Ruth.

"See him?" she whispered. "That's the boy who you said looked like Henry Smith. See his curly hair?"

"Oh, Helen!" gasped Ruth, a thought stabbing her suddenly. "Suppose it is?"

"Suppose it is what?"

"Suppose it *should* be Curly whom the police

were after? You know, that dressed-up boy—if it was he we saw on the dock—had curly hair."

"So he had! I forgot that when we were trailing that queer old maid," chuckled Helen.

"This is no laughing matter, dear," whispered Ruth, watching the curly-haired boy closely. "Having gotten rid of his disguise, there was no reason why that boy should not stay aboard the steamboat."

"No; I suppose not," admitted Helen, rather puzzled.

"And if it is Curly——"

"Oh, goodness me! we don't even know that Henry Smith has run away!" exclaimed Helen.

Instantly the boy near them started. He rose and clung to the rail for a moment. But he did not look back at the two girls.

Ruth had clutched Helen's arm and whispered: "Hush!" She was not sure whether the boy had heard or not. At any rate, he did not look at them, but walked slowly away. They did not see his face at all.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPES OF VIRGINIA

RUTH and Helen did not think of going to bed until long after Absecon Light, off Atlantic City, was passed. They watched the long-spread lights of the great seaside resort until they disappeared in the distance and Ludlum Beach Light twinkled in the west.

The music of the orchestra came to their ears faintly; but above all was the murmur and jar of the powerful machinery that drove the ship. This had become a monotone that rather got on the girls' nerves.

"Oh, dear! let's go to bed," said Helen plaintively. "I *don't* see why those engines have to pound so. It sounds like the tramping of a herd of elephants."

"Did you ever hear a herd of elephants tramping?" asked Ruth, laughing.

"No; but I can imagine how they would sound," said Helen. "At any rate, let's go to bed."

They did not see the curly-haired boy; but as they went in to the ladies' lavatory on their side

of the deck, they came face to face with the queer woman with whom they had already had some trouble.

She glared at the two girls so viperishly that Helen would never have had the courage to accost her. Not so Ruth. She ignored the angry gaze of the lady and said:

"I hope you have found your ticket, ma'am?"

"No, I haven't found it—and you know right well I haven't," declared the short-haired woman.

"Surely, you do not believe that my friend and I took it?" Ruth said, flushing a little, yet holding her ground. "We would have no reason for doing such a thing, I assure you."

"Oh, I don't know what you did it for!" exclaimed the woman harshly. "With all my experience with you and your kind I have never yet been able to foretell what a rattlepated schoolgirl will do, or her reason for doing it."

"I am sorry if your experience has been so unfortunate with schoolgirls," Ruth said. "But please do not class my friend and me with those you know—who you intimate would steal. We did not take your ticket, ma'am."

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed Helen, under her breath.

The woman tossed her head and her pale, blue eyes seemed to emit sparks. "You can't tell me! You can't tell me!" she declared. "I know you

girls. You've made me trouble enough, I should hope. I would believe anything of you—*anything*!"

"Do come away, Ruth," whispered Helen; and Ruth seeing that there was no use talking with such a set and vindictive person, complied.

"But we don't want her going about the boat and telling people that we stole her ticket," Ruth said, with indignation. "How will that sound? Some persons may believe her."

"How are you going to stop her?" Helen demanded. "Muzzle her?"

"That might not be a bad plan," Ruth said, beginning to smile again. "Oh! but she *did* make me so angry!"

"I noticed that for once our mild Ruth quite lost her temper," Helen said, delightedly giggling. "Did me good to hear you stand up to her."

"I wonder who she is and what sort of girls she teaches—for of course she *is* a teacher," said Ruth.

"In a reform school, I should think," Helen said. "Her opinion of schoolgirls is something awful. It's worse than Miss Brokaw's."

"Do you suppose that fifteen years of teaching can make any woman hate girls as she certainly does?" Ruth said reflectively. "There must be something really wrong with her——"

"There's something wrong with her looks, that's

sure," Helen agreed. "She is the dowdiest thing I ever saw."

"Her way of dressing has nothing to do with it. It is the hateful temper she shows. I am afraid that poor woman has had a very hard time with her pupils."

"There you go!" cried Helen. "Beginning to pity her! I thought you would not be sensible for long. Oh, Ruthie Fielding! you would find an excuse for a man's murdering his wife and seven children."

"Yes, I suppose so," Ruth said. "Of course, he would have to be insane to do it."

They returned to their stateroom. It was somewhat ghostly, Helen thought, along the narrow deck now. Ruth fumbled at the lock for some time.

"Are you sure you have the right room?" Helen whispered.

"I've got the right room, for I know the number; but I'm not sure about the key," giggled Ruth. "Oh! here it opens."

They went in. Ruth remembered where the electric light bulb was and snapped on the light. "There! isn't this cozy?" she asked.

"'Snug as a bug in a rug,'" quoted Helen. "Goodness! how sharp your elbow is, dear!"

"And that was my foot you stepped on," complained Ruth.

"I believe we'll have to take turns undressing," Helen said. "One stay outside on the deck till the other gets into bed."

"And we've got to draw lots for the upper berth. What a climb!"

"It makes me awfully dizzy to look down from high places," giggled Helen. "I don't believe I'd dare to climb into that upper berth."

"Now, Miss Cameron!" cried Ruth, with mock sternness. "We'll settle this thing at once. No cheating. Here are two matches——"

"Matches! Where did you get matches?"

"Out of my bag. In this tiny box. I have never traveled without matches since the time we girls were lost in the snow up in the woods that time. Remember?"

"I should say I do remember our adventures at Snow Camp," sighed Helen. "But I never would have remembered to carry matches, just the same."

"Now, I break the head off this one. Do you see? One is now shorter than the other. I put them together—*so*. Now I hide them in my hand. You pull one, Helen. If you pull the longer one you get the lower berth."

"I get something else, too, don't I?" said Helen.

"What?"

"The match!" laughed the other girl. "There! Oh, dear me! it's the short one."

"Oh, that's too bad, dear," cried Ruth, at once sympathetic. "If you really dread getting into the upper berth——"

"Be still, you foolish thing!" cried Helen, hugging her. "If we were going to the guillotine and I drew first place, you'd offer to have your dear little neck chopped first. I know you."

The next moment Helen began on something else. "Oh, me! oh, my! what a pair of little geese we are, Ruthie."

"What about?" demanded her chum.

"Why! see this button in the wall? And we were scrambling all over the place for the electric light bulb. Can't we punch it on?" and she tried the button tentatively.

"Now you've done it!" groaned Ruth.

"Done what?" demanded Helen in alarm. "I guess that hasn't anything to do with the electric lights. Is it the fire alarm?"

"No. But it costs money every time you punch that button. You are as silly as poor, little, flaxen-haired Amy Gregg was when she came to Briarwood Hall and did not know how to manipulate the electric light buttons."

"But what have I *done?*" demanded Helen. "Why will it cost me money?"

Ruth calmly reached down the ice-water pitcher from its rack. "You'll know in a minute," she said. "There! hear it?"

A faint tinkling approached. It came along the deck outside and Helen pushed back the blind a little way to look out. Immediately a soft, drawling voice spoke.

"D'jew ring fo' ice-water, missy? I got it right yere."

Ruth already had found a dime and she thrust it out with the pitcher. It was their own particular "colored gemmen," as Helen gigglingly called him. She dodged back out of sight, for she had removed her shirtwaist. He filled the pitcher and went tinkling away along the deck with a pleasant, "I 'ank ye, missy. Goo' night."

"I declare!" cried Helen. "He's one of the genii or a bottle imp. He appears just when you want him, performs his work, and silently disappears."

"That man will be rich before we get to Old Point Comfort," sighed Ruth, who was of a frugal disposition.

They closed the blind again, and a little later the lamp on the deck outside was extinguished. The girls had said their prayers, and now Helen, with much hilarity, "shinnied up" to the berth above, kicking her night slippers off as she plunged into it.

"Good-bye—if I don't see you again," she said plaintively. "You may have to call the fire department with their ladders, to get me down."

Ruth snapped off the light, and then registered her getting into bed by a bump on her head against the lower edge of the upper berth.

"Oh, my, Helen! You have the best of it after all. Oh, how that hurt!"

"M-m-m-m!" from Helen. So quickly was she asleep!

But Ruth could not go immediately to Dreamland. There had been too much of an exciting nature happening.

She lay and thought of Curly Smith, and of the disguised boy, and of the obnoxious school teacher who had accused her and Helen of robbing her. The odor of Tom's roses finally became so oppressive that she got up to open the blind again for more air. She again struck her head. It was impossible to remember that berth edge every time she got up and down.

As she stepped lightly upon the floor in her bare feet she heard a stealthy footstep outside. It brought Ruth to an immediate halt, her hand stretched out toward the blind. Through the interstices of the blind she could see that the white moonlight flooded the deck. Stealthily she drew back the blind and peered out.

The person on the deck had halted almost opposite the window. Ruth knew now that the steamer must be well across the Five Fathom Bank, with the Delaware Lightship behind them

and the Fenwick Lightship not far ahead. To the west was the wide entrance to Delaware Bay, and the land was now as far away from them as it would be at any time during the trip.

She peered out quietly. There stood the curly-haired boy again, leaning on the rail, and looking wistfully off to the distant shore.

Was it Henry Smith? Was he the boy who had come aboard the boat in girl's clothes? And if so, what would he do when the boat docked at Old Point Comfort and the detectives appeared? They would probably have a good description of the boy wanted, and could pick him out of the crowd going ashore.

Ruth was almost tempted to speak to the boy—to whisper to him. Had she been sure it was Curly she would have done so, for she knew him so well. But, as before, his face was turned away from her.

He moved on, and Ruth softly slid back the blind and stole to bed again, for the third time bumping her head. "My! if this keeps on, I'll be all lumps and hollows like an outline map of the Rocky Mountains," she whimpered, and then cuddled down under the sheet and lay looking out of the open window.

The sea air blew softly in and cooled her flushed cheeks. The odor of the roses was not so oppressive, and after a time she dropped to sleep. When

she awoke it was because of the change in the temperature some time before dawn. The moon was gone; but there was a faint light upon the water.

Helen moved in the berth above. "Hullo, up there!" whispered Ruth.

"Hullo, down there!" was the quick reply. "What ever made me wake up so early?"

"Because you want to get up early," replied Ruth, this time sliding out of her berth so adroitly that she did *not* bump her head.

Helen came tumbling down, skinning her elbow and landing with a thump on the floor. "Gracious to goodness—and all hands around!" she ejaculated. "Talk about sleeping on a shelf in a Pullman car! Why, that's 'Home Sweet Home' to *this*. I came near to breaking my neck."

"Come on! scramble into your clothes," said Ruth, already at the wash basin.

Helen peered out. "Why—oh, my!" she said, shivering and holding the lacy neck of her gown about her. "It's da-ark yet. It must be midnight."

"It is ten minutes to four o'clock," said Ruth promptly. She had studied the route and knew it exactly. "That is Chincoteague Island Light yonder. That's where those cunning little ponies that Madge Steele's father had at Sunrise Farm came from."

"Wha-at?" yawned Helen. "Did they come from the light?"

"No, goosy! from the island. They are bred there."

Ten minutes later the chums were out on the open deck. They raced forward to see if they could see the sun. His face was still below the sea, but a flush along the edge of the horizon announced his coming.

"Oh, see yonder!" cried Helen. "See the shore! How near! And the long line of beaches. What's that white line outside the yellow sand?"

"The surf," Ruth said. "And that must be Hog Island Light. How faint it is. The sun is putting it out."

"It's a long way ahead."

"Yes. We won't pass that till almost six o'clock. Oh, Helen! there comes the sun."

"What's that?" asked Helen, suddenly seizing her chum's wrist. "Did you hear it?"

"That splash? The men are washing decks."

"It is a man overboard!" murmured Helen.

"More likely a big fish jumping," said the practical Ruth.

The girls hung over the rail, looking shoreward, and tried in the uncertain light to see if there was any object floating on the water. If Helen expected to see a black spot like the head of a swimmer, she was disappointed.

But she did see—and so did Ruth—a lazy fishing smack drifting by on the tide. They could almost have thrown a stone aboard of her.

There seemed to be a little excitement aboard the smack. Men ran to and fro and leaned over the rail. Then the girls thought they saw the smackmen spear something, or possibly somebody, with a boathook and haul their prize aboard.

"I believe somebody did fall overboard from this steamer, and those fishermen have picked him up," Helen declared.

The girls watched the sunrise and the shore line for another hour or more and then went in to breakfast. When they came back to the open deck the steamer was flying past the coast of the lower Peninsula, and Cape Charles Lightship courtesied to her on the swells.

Far, far in the distance they saw the staff of the Cape Henry Light. The steamer soon turned her prow to pass between these two points of land, known to seamen as the Capes of Virginia, which mark the entrance to Chesapeake Bay.

Their fair trip down the coast from New York was almost ended and the chums began to pick up their things in the stateroom and repack their bags.

CHAPTER V

THE NEWSPAPER ACCOUNT

"Do you suppose Nettie and her aunt have arrived, Ruth?"

"I really don't," Ruth Fielding said, as she and her chum stood on the upper deck again and watched the shore which they were approaching so rapidly.

"Goodness! won't you feel funny going up to that big, sprawling hotel alone?"

"No, dear. I sha'n't be alone," laughed Ruth. "You will be with me, won't you?"

Helen merely pinched her for answer.

"The rooms are engaged for us, you know," Ruth assured her chum. "Mrs. Parsons knew she might be delayed by business in Washington and that we would possibly reach the hotel first. They have our names and all we have to do is to present her card."

"Fine! I leave it all to you," agreed Helen.

"Of course you will. You always do," said Ruth drily. "You certainly are one of the fortunate ones in this world, Helen, dear."

"How am I?"

"Because," Ruth said, laughing, "all you ever will do in any emergency will be to roll those pretty eyes of yours and look helpless, and *somebody* will come to your rescue."

"Lucky me, then!" sighed her friend. "How green the grass is on the shore, Ruth—and how blue the water. Isn't this one lovely morning?"

"And a beautiful place we are going to. That's the fort yonder—the largest in the United States, I shouldn't wonder."

As the steamer drew in closer to the dock those passengers who were not going on to Norfolk got their hand baggage together and pressed toward the forward lower deck, from which they would land at the Point. The girls followed suit; but as they came out of their stateroom there was the omnipresent colored man, in his porter's uniform now, ready to take the bags.

Ruth and Helen let him take the bags, though they were very well able to carry them, for he was insistent. The stewardess—a comfortable looking old "aunty" in starched cap and apron—was likewise bobbing courtesies to them as they went through the saloon. Helen's ready purse drew the colored population of that boat as a honey-pot does bees.

As they descended to the lower deck, suddenly the queer looking school teacher, with the short

hair and funny clothes, faced them. The purser had evidently been trying to pacify her, but now he gave it up.

"You mean to tell me that you won't demand to have these girls examined—*searched?*" cried the angry woman. "They may have taken my ticket for fun, but it's a serious matter and they are now afraid to give it up. I know 'em—root and branch!"

"Do you *know* these two young ladies?" demanded the purser, in surprise.

"Yes; I know their kind. I have been teaching girls just like 'em for fifteen years. They're up to all kinds of mischief."

"Oh, madam!" cried the purser, "that is strong language. I cannot hold these young ladies on your say-so. You have no evidence. Nor do I believe they have your ticket in their possession."

"Of course you'd take their side!" sniffed the woman.

"I am on the side of innocence always. If you care to get into trouble by speaking to the police, you will probably find two policemen waiting on the dock as we go ashore. They are after that disguised boy who came aboard."

The woman tossed her head and strode away, after glaring again at the embarrassed girls. The purser said, gently:

"I am very sorry, young ladies, that you have

been annoyed by that person. And I am glad that you did not let the offence make *us* any more trouble. Of course, she had no right to speak of you and to you as she has.

"I believe she is to be pitied, however. I learn that she is going on a trip South for her health, after a particularly arduous year's work. She is, as she intimates, a teacher in a big girl's boarding school in New England. She is probably not a favorite with her pupils at best, and is now undoubtedly broken down nervously and not quite responsible for what she says and does."

Then the purser continued, smiling: "Perhaps you can imagine that her pupils have not tried to make her life pleasant. I have a daughter about your age who goes to such a school, and I know from her that sometimes the girls are rather thoughtless of an instructor's comfort—if they dislike her."

"Oh, that is true enough, I expect," Ruth admitted. "See how they used to treat little Picolet!" she added to Helen.

"I guess *no* girl would fall in love with this horrid creature who says we stole her ticket."

"She is not of a lovable disposition, that is sure," agreed the purser. "Her name is Miss Miggs. I hope you will not see her again."

"Oh! you don't suppose she will try to make trouble for us ashore?" Ruth cried.

"I will see that she does not. I will speak to the officers who I expect are awaiting the boat's arrival. They have already communicated with us by wireless about that boy."

"Wireless!" cried Helen. "And we didn't know you had it aboard. I certainly would have thanked Tom for those roses. And then, Ruth! Just think of telegraphing by wireless!"

"Sorry you missed that, young ladies. The instrument is in Room Seventy," said the purser, bustling away.

" 'Too late! too late! the villain cried!' " murmured Helen. "We missed that."

"Never mind," said Ruth, smiling. "If we go back to New York by boat we can hang around the wireless telegraph room all the time and you can send messages to all your friends."

"No I can't," said Helen shortly.

"Why not?"

"Because I won't have any money left by that time," Helen declared ruefully. "Goodness! how much it does cost to travel."

"It does, I guess, if you practise such generosity as you have practised," said Ruth. "Do use a little judgment, Helen. You tip recklessly, and you buy everything you see."

"No," declared her chum. "There's one thing I've seen that I wouldn't buy if it was selling as cheap as 'two bits,' as these folks say down here."

"What's that?" asked Ruth, with a laugh.

"That old maid school marm from New England," Helen replied promptly.

"Poor thing!" commented Ruth.

"There you go! Pitying her already! How do you know that she won't try to have us arrested?"

"Goodness! we'll hope not," said Ruth, as they surged toward the gangway with the rest of the disembarking passengers, the boat having already docked.

The crowd came out into the sunshine of a perfect morning upon a bustling dock. There was a goodly crowd from the hotels to see the newcomers land. Some of the passengers were met by friends; but neither Nettie Parsons nor her aunt were in sight.

The porter who carried the girls' bags, however, handed them over to a hotel porter and evidently said a good word for them to that functionary; for he was very attentive and led the chums out of the crowd toward the broad veranda of the hotel front.

Ruth and Helen had sharp eyes, and they saw two plain-clothes men standing by to watch the forthcoming passengers.

"The officers looking for that boy," whispered Ruth.

"Oh, dear! do you suppose he *was* Curly?"

"I don't know. I must write to Mrs. Smith as soon as we get to the hotel."

The chums had traveled considerably by land, and had ventured into more than one hotel; but never alone. When they had gone to Montana to visit Ann Hicks, Ann's Uncle Bill had been with them and had looked after the transportation matters. And in going into the Adirondacks they had traveled in a private car.

The porter took them immediately to a reception parlor, and took Mrs. Parson's card that she had given Ruth to the hotel manager. The manager came himself to greet the girls. Mrs. Parsons' name was evidently well known at this hotel.

"At this time of year there is a choice of rooms at your disposal," he said. "I will show you the suite Mrs. Parsons usually has; but if the rooms assigned you are not satisfactory, we can accommodate you elsewhere."

As they went up to the rooms Helen whispered: "Don't you feel kind of *bridey?*"

"Kind of what?" gasped her chum.

"Why, as though you were on your bridal tour?" said Helen. "We've got on brand new clothes, and everybody treats us as though we were queens."

"Maybe you feel that you are a queen," giggled Ruth. "But not me. If you are a bride, Helen Cameron, where is the gloom?"

"Gloom?" repeated Helen. "Do you mean *groom?*"

"Not in your case," sniffed Ruth. "He will be a 'gloom' all right, the way you make the money fly. See how you tipped that fellow below just now. He's standing in a trance, looking at that dollar yet."

"I—I didn't have anything smaller," confessed the culprit.

"Well, you ought to have had change."

"My! do you want me to do as the old lady said she did when going to church? She always carried some buttons in her purse, for then, if she had run out of change, when the contribution box was passed she'd still have something to drop in."

Ruth went off into a gale of laughter. "I wonder how that darkey would have looked if you had contributed a button to him."

The manager here threw open a door which gave entrance upon two big rooms, with a bathroom between, the windows opening upon a balcony. To the girls it seemed a most delightful place—so high and airy—and such a view!

"Oh, this will be lovely," Ruth assured him. "And are Mrs. Parsons' rooms yonder?"

"Right through that door," replied the man. "There are the buttons. Ring for any attendance you may need. If everything is not perfectly satisfactory, young ladies, let me know."

He bowed himself out. Helen performed several stately steps about the first room. "I tell you, my dear, we are very important. Nettie's Aunt Rachel is a *dear!* Or are all people down here in Dixie as polite as this person with the side whiskers?"

"Why! I think people are kind to us almost everywhere," said Ruth, laying off her hat and coat.

"What shall we do first?" asked Helen.

"I told you. I am going right down to the ladies' writing room—I saw it as we came through the lower floor—and write to Mrs. Smith. If Curly *did* run away, we know where he is."

"Do we?" asked Helen, doubtfully.

"Why—I—— Well, he was aboard that steamer, I am sure," Ruth said.

"Is he now?" asked Helen. "I believe he went overboard and was picked up by that fishing boat."

"Goodness! do you really believe so?"

"I am quite positive that the disguised boy did just that," said Helen, nodding her dark head confidently.

"Well, I can tell Mrs. Smith nothing about that; it would only scare her. But I want her to write to me as soon as she can and tell me if Curly is at home. Poor boy! what ever would become of him if he ran away?"

"And with the police after him!" Helen added.

"I am sure he never committed any real crime."

"So am I sure. But he was always playing jokes and was up to all kinds of mischief. He was bound to get into trouble," Ruth said, with a sigh. "Everybody around there disliked him so."

Ruth went downstairs and easily found the writing room. Outside was a periodical and newspaper stand. The New York morning papers had just arrived and Ruth bought one before she entered the writing room. Before beginning the letter to Mrs. Sadoc Smith, she opened the paper and almost the first brief article she noticed was the following:

"A police launch followed the New Union S.S. *Pocahontas* yesterday afternoon as far as the Narrows, and plain-clothes men James Morrisy, B. Phelps, Schwartz and Rockheimer, boarded her to search for a boy from up-state who has created a stir in the vicinity of Lumberton.

"It is reported that Henry Smith, fifteen years old, tall for his age, curly, chestnut hair, small features, especially girlish face, is accused of helping a pair of tramps rob the Lumberton railroad station. The tramps escaped on a hand-car with their booty. The local police went after Henry, who lives with his grandmother, Mrs. Sadoc Smith, his only relative, an eminently respectable woman. Henry locked himself in his room, and

while his grandmother was urging him to come out and give himself up to the police, he slid out of the window and over the shed roof, dropping to the ground—the old path to the circus grounds and the bright and early Independence Day celebration.

"Henry Smith left home with some money and a new pair of boots. The boots and his other male attire he seems to have exchanged for female garb at a hotel in Albany. Henry masquerades as a girl very effectively, it is said.

"The Albany police were just too late in reaching the hotel, but later had reason to know that Henry had come on to New York by train. Detective Morrisy and his squad missed the fugitive at the Grand Central Terminal. Through the good offices of a taxicab driver, Henry was traced to the New Union pier, where he was supposed to have boarded the *Pocahontas*.

"The detectives, however, did not find Henry Smith thereon, neither in female garb nor in his proper habiliments. The police at Old Point Comfort and Norfolk have been notified to watch for the boy. His grandmother, Mrs. Sadoc Smith, declares she will disinherit her grandson."

CHAPTER VI

ALL IN THE RAIN

RUTH FIELDING was so much disturbed over the story of Curly Smith's escapade that she had to run and show the paper to Helen before she did anything else. And then the chums had to talk it all over, and exclaim over the boy's boldness, and the odd fact that *they* should have seen him in his girl's apparel, and not have known him.

"After seeing him dressed up in Ann's old dress that time, too," sighed Helen. "The foolish boy!"

"But only think of his dropping off that shed roof. Do you know, Helen, it is twenty feet from the ground?"

"That reporter writes as though he thought it were a joke," Helen said. "Mean thing!"

"He never saw that shed," said Ruth.

"It is fortunate poor Curly didn't break his neck."

"And his grandmother says she will disinherit him. That's really cruel! I dare not tell her what I think when I write," Ruth said. "But I will tell

her how Curly is being hounded by the police, and that he jumped overboard."

"Sure he did! He's an awfully brave boy," Helen declared.

"I'm not sure that he's to be praised for that kind of bravery. It was a perilous chance he took. I wonder where he will go—what he will do? Goodness! what a boy!"

"He's all right," urged Helen, with admiration. "I don't believe the police will ever catch him."

"But what will become of him?"

"If we come across him again, we'll help him," said Helen, with confidence.

"That's not likely. I can't even tell Mrs. Smith where he has gone. We don't know."

"Let's go out and make sure that he wasn't taken by the police here, or at Norfolk."

"How will you find out?"

"At the dock. Somebody will know."

"You go. I'll write to Mrs. Smith. Don't get lost," said Ruth, drawing paper and envelopes toward her and preparing to write the missive.

It was growing dark before Ruth finished the letter—and that should not have been, for it was not yet noon! She looked up and then ran to the window. A storm cloud was sweeping down the bay and off across Hampton Roads. Over in Norfolk it was raining—a sharp shower. But it did not look as though it would hit the Point.

While Ruth was looking out Helen came running into the writing room, greatly excited. "Oh, come on, Ruthie!" she cried. "I've got a man who will take us for a drive all around the Point and around the fortress."

"In what?" asked Ruth, doubtfully.

"Well, I'd call it a barouche. It's an old thing; but he's such a nice, old darkey, and——"

"How much have you already paid him, my dear?" asked Ruth, interrupting.

"Well—I—— Oh! don't be so inquisitive!"

"And I thought you went to inquire whether they had arrested that boy?"

"Oh! didn't I tell you?" said Helen. "They didn't get him. Neither here nor at Norfolk. I asked the man on the dock. Then this nice, old colored man in *such* a funny livery, asked me to ride with him. He's been driving white folks around here, he says, ever since the war."

"What war? The War with Spain?" asked Ruth, tartly. "I begin to believe that there must be some sign on you, my dear, which tells these fellows that you have money and can be easily parted from it."

"Now, Ruthie——"

"That is true. Well! we'll get our hats——"

"Don't need anything of the kind. Or wraps, either. It's lovely out."

"But that black cloud?"

"What do you mean, Ruthie? My hack driver?" giggled Helen.

"Nonsense, you naughty child! That thunder storm."

"The driver says it won't come over here. Let's go."

"All right," Ruth finally said. "I know you have already paid him and we must get some return for your money."

"What a terribly saving creature you are," scoffed Helen. "I begin to believe that you have caught Uncle Jabez's disease, living with him there in the Red Mill. There! Oh, Ruth! I didn't mean that. I wouldn't hurt your feelings for anything."

But she had effectually closed Ruth's lips upon the subject of the waste of money. Her chum's countenance was rather serious as they went out upon the great veranda, which had a sweep wider than the face of the Capitol at Washington. Below them was a decrepit old carriage, drawn by a horse, the harness of which was repaired in more than one place with rope. The smart equipages made this ramshackle old vehicle look older than Noah's Ark at Briarwood Hall.

Helen was enormously amused by the looks of the old rattletrap and the funny appearance of the driver. The latter was an aged negro with a gray poll and gaps in his teeth when he grinned. He

wore a tall hat such as the White House coachman is pictured as wearing in Lincoln's day. The long-tailed coat he wore had once been blue, but was now faded to a distinct maroon shade, saving a patch on the small of his back which had retained much of its original color by being sheltered against the seat-back.

The vest and trousers this nondescript wore were coarse white duck, but starched and ironed, and as white as the snow. The least said about his shoes the better, and a glimpse Ruth had of one brown shank, as the old man got creakingly down to politely open the barouche door for them, assured her that he wore no hose at all.

"Do get in," giggled Helen. "Did you ever see such a funny old thing?"

"It looks as if it would fall to pieces," objected Ruth.

"He assures me it won't. I don't care if everybody *is* laughing at us."

"Neither do I. But I believe it is going to rain."

"Nothing more than a little shower, if any," Helen said, and popped into the carriage. Ruth, rather doubtful still, followed her. Amid a good deal of amusement on the part of the company on the verandas, the rattling equipage rolled away.

They rode along the edge of the fortress moat and past the officer's quarters, and so around the

entire fortress and across the reservation into the country. The old man sat very stiff and upright in his seat, flourished his whip over his old horse in a grand manner, and altogether made as brave an appearance as possible.

The knock-kneed horse dragged its feet over the highway with a shuffle that made Ruth nervous. She liked a good horse. This one moved so slowly, and the turnout was altogether so ridiculous, that Ruth did not know whether to join Helen in laughing at it, or get out and walk back.

Suddenly, however, a drizzle of rain began to fall. It was not unexpected, for the clouds were still black and a chill breeze had blown up.

"We'll have to go back, Uncle," cried Helen to the driver.

"Wait a minute—wait a minute," urged the old man. "Ah'll git right down an' fix dat hood. Dat'll shelter yo' till we gits back t' de hotel—ya-as'm."

"You should not have encouraged us to come out with you when it was sure to rain," said Ruth, rather tartly for her.

"Sho' 'nuff, missy—sho' 'nuff," cackled the old darkey. "But 'twas a great temptation."

"What was a great temptation?"

"To earn a dollar. Dollars come skeerce like nowadays, for Unc' Simmy. He kyan't keep up wid dese yere taxum-cabs an' de rich folks' smart

conveyances—no'm!" and the old negro chuckled as though poverty, too, were a humorous thing.

He began to fuss with the hood of the carriage, which was supposed to pull up and shelter the occupants. But it would not "stay put," as Helen laughingly said, and the summer shower began to patter harder on the unprotected girls.

"You'd better not mind it, Mr. Simmy," Helen said, "and drive us back at once. We're bound to get wet anyway."

"Dey calls me *Unc'* Simmy, missy—ma frien's do," said the old man, rheumatically climbing to his seat again. "An' Ah ain't gwine t' drib yo' back to de hotel in de face ob dishyer shower, an' git all yo' fin'ry wet. No'm! Yo' leab' Unc' Simmy 'lone fo' a-gittin' yo' to shelter 'twill de storm passes ober."

He touched up the old horse with the whiplash, and the creature really broke into a knock-kneed trot, Unc' Simmy meanwhile singing a broken accompaniment to the shuffling pace of his steed:

" 'On Jor-dy-an's sto'my bank I stand
An' cas' a wishful eye
T' Can-ny-an's bright an' glo-ree-ous land—
Ma' ho-o-me 'twill be, bymeby!'

Dis ain' gwine t' be much ob a shower, missy. We turns in yere."

They had passed several smart looking dwellings—villas they might better be called—and more than one old, Southern house with high pillars in front and an air of decayed gentility about them.

Unc' Simmy swung his steed through a ruined gateway where the Virginia creeper and honeysuckle hid the gateposts and wall. There was a small wooden structure like a gate-keeper's cottage, much out of repair. The shingles on the roof had curled in the hot sun's rays till they resembled clutching fingers; some of the siding-strips in the peak, far out of ordinary reach, hung and flapped by one nail; some bricks were missing from the chimney-top; the house had not been painted for at least two decades. The porch on the front was sheltered by climbing vines, and there were many old-fashioned flowers in neatly kept beds before the little house. But the girls did not see much of the front of the cottage just then, for the old horse went by and up the lane at a clumsy gallop. The rain was coming down faster.

"Where for pity's sake is he taking us?" Ruth demanded.

"I don't care—it's fun," gasped Helen, cowering before the rain drops.

Behind the cottage was a small barn—evidently built much more recently than the house. The wide door was swung open and hooked back and Unc' Simmy drove inside.

"Dar we is!" he cried exultantly. "Ah'll jes' take yo' all in t' visit wid' Miss Catalpa while Ah fixes dishyer kerrige so it'll take yo' back to de P'int dry—ya-as'm."

"'Miss Catalpa,' no less!" murmured Helen in Ruth's ear. "*That* sounds like a real darkey name, doesn't it? I wonder if she's an old aunty—or mammy, do they call them?"

But Ruth was interested in another phase of the matter. "Won't the lady object to unexpected visitors, Uncle Simmy?" she asked.

"Lor' bress yo'! no, honey," he said, helping her out of the sheltered carriage, and then Helen in turn. "Yo' come right in wid me. Miss Catalpa's on de front po'ch. She likes t' hear de drummin' ob de rain, she say—er—he, he, he! W'ite folks sho' do have funny sayin's, don't dey?"

"Then Miss Catalpa is *white!*" gasped Helen to Ruth, as the old darkey led the way across the back yard to the cottage.

They reached the shelter of the front veranda just as the rain "came down in buckets," as Helen declared. The chums had never seen it rain so hard before. And the thunder of it on the porch roof drowned all other sound. Unc' Simmy was grinning at them and saying something; they could see his lips moving; but they could not hear a word.

In the half dusk of the vine-sheltered porch they

saw him gesticulating and they looked toward the other end. There was a low table and a sewing basket. In a low rocker, swinging to and fro, and crooning a song perhaps, for her lips were moving as her needles flashed back and forth in the soft wool she was knitting, was a fair, pink-cheeked little lady, her light brown hair rippling away from her brow and over her ears in some old-fashioned and forgotten style, but which was very becoming to the wearer.

Her ear was turned toward their end of the porch, and she was smiling. Evidently, in spite of the drumming of the hard rain, she had distinguished their coming; but her eyes had the unmistakable look of those who live in darkness.

The little lady was blind.

CHAPTER VII

MISS CATALPA

"Oh! the poor dear!" gasped Helen, for she, like Ruth, discovered the little lady's infirmity, almost at once.

The old negro coachman pompously strode down the porch, beckoning to the girls to follow. They were, for the moment, embarrassed. It seemed impudent to approach this strange gentlewoman with no introduction save that of the disreputable looking Unc' Simmy.

But the quick, sudden shower lulled a little and they could hear the lady's voice—a sweet, delicious, drawling tone. She said:

"Yo' have brought some callers, I see, Simmy. Good afternoon, young ladies."

Her use of the word "see" brought the quick, stinging tears to Ruth Fielding's eyes. But the lady's smile and outstretched hand welcomed both girls to her end of the porch. The hand was frail and beautiful. It surely had never done any work more arduous than the knitting in the lady's lap.

She was dressed very plainly in gingham; but

every flaunce was starched and ironed beautifully, and the lace in the low-cut neck of the cheap gown and at the wrists, was valuable and ivory-hued with age.

The negro cleared his voice and said, with great respect, removing his ancient hat as he did so:

"De young ladies done tak' refuge yere wid' yo' w'ile it shower so hard, Miss Catalpa. I tell 'em yo' don't mind dem comin' in t' res'. Yo' knows Unc' Simmy dribes de quality eround de P'int nowadays."

"Oh, yes, Simmy. I know," said Miss Catalpa, with a little sigh. "It isn't as it used to be befo' *we* had to take refuge, too, in this old gatehouse. It is a refuge both in sun and rain fo' us. How do you do, my dears? I know you are young ladies—and I love the young. And I fancy you are from the No'th, too?"

And Helen and Ruth had not yet said a word! The subtle appreciation of the blind woman told her much that astonished the girls.

"Yes, ma'am," said Ruth, striving to keep her voice from shaking, for the pity she felt for the lady gripped her at the throat. "We are two schoolgirls who have come down to Dixie to play for a few weeks after our graduation from Briarwood Hall."

"Indeed? I went to school fo' a while at Miss Chamberlain's in Washington. Hers was a very

select young ladies' school. But, re'lly, you know, had my po' eyes not been too weak to study, the family exchequer could scarcely stand the drain," and she laughed, low and sweetly. "The Grogan fortunes had long been on the wane, you see. No men to build them up again. The war took everything from us; but the heaviest blow of all was the killin' of our men."

"It must have been terrible," said Ruth, "to lose one's brothers and fathers and cousins by bullet and sword."

"Yes, indeed!" sighed the lady. "Not that I can remembah it, child! No more than you can. I'm not so old as all that," and she laughed merrily. "The Grogan plantation was gone, of course, long before I saw the light. But my father was a broken man, disabled by the campaigns he went through."

"Isn't it terrible?" whispered Helen to her chum, for it sounded to the unsophisticated girl like a tale of recent happenings.

Miss Catalpa smiled, turning her sightless eyes up to them. "There's only Unc' Simmy and I left now. My lawyer, Kunnel Wildah, tells me there is barely enough left to keep us in this po' place till I'm called to my long rest," said the lady devoutly.

"But my wants are few. Uncle Simmy does for me most beautifully. He is the last of the family servants—bo'n himself on the old planta-

tion. This was the gateway to the Grogan Place —and it was a mile from the house," and she laughed again—pleasantly, sweetly, and as carefree in sound as a bird's note. "The limits of the estate have shrunk, you see."

"It must be dreadful to have been rich, and then fall into poverty," Helen said, commiseratingly.

"Why, honey," said Miss Catalpa, cheerfully, "nothin' is dreadful in this wo'ld if we look at it right. All trials are sent for our blessin', if we take them right. Even my blindness," she added simply. "It must have been for my good that I was deprived of the boon of sight ten years ago—just when almost the last bit of money left to me seemed to have been lost. And I expect if I hadn't foolishly cried so much over the failure of the Needles Bank where the money was, and which seemed to be a total wreck, I would not have been totally blind. So the doctors tell me."

"Dear, dear!" murmured Helen, wiping her own eyes.

"But then, you see, there was enough saved from the wreckage after all to keep me alive," and Miss Catalpa smiled again. "All that troubles me is what will become of Uncle Simmy when I am gone. He insists on 'dribin de quality', as he calls it, and so earns a little something for himself. That livery he wears is the old Grogan livery. I expect it is a good deal faded by now,"

she laughed, adding: "Our old barouche, too! He insists on taking me out in it every pleasant Sunday. I can feel that the cushions are ragged and that the wheels wobble. Po' Uncle Simmy! Ah! here he is. Surely, Simmy, the rain hasn't stopped?"

"No'm, Miss Catalpa," said the old negro, appearing and bowing again. "But mebbe 'twon't stop soon, an' deseyer young ladies want t' git back fo' luncheon at de hotel. I done fix' dat hood, misses. 'Twell keep yo' dry."

Ruth took the lady's hand again. "I am glad to have met you," she said, her voice quite firm now. "If we stay long enough at the Point, may we come and see you again?"

"Sho'ly! Sho'ly, my dear," she said, drawing Ruth down to kiss her cheek. "I love to have you young people about me. Take good care of them, Uncle Simmy."

"Ya-as'm, Miss Catalpa—Ah sho' will."

She kissed Helen, too, and possibly felt the tears on the girl's cheek. She patted the hand she held and whispered: "Don't weep for me, my dear. I am going to a better and a brighter world some day, I know. I am not through with this one yet—and I love it. There is nothing to weep for."

"And if I were she I'd not only cry my eyes blind, but I'd cry them *out!*" whispered Helen to Ruth, as they followed the old coachman.

When they were out of ear-shot of the Lady of the Gatehouse Ruth asked: "Who keeps house for Miss Grogan, Uncle Simmy?"

"Fo' Miss Catalpa?" ejaculated the negro. "Sho', missy, she don't need nobody but Unc' Simmy."

"There is no woman servant?"

"Lor' bress yo'," chuckled the black man, "ain't been no money to pay sarbents since dat Needleses' Bank done busted. Nebber *did* hear tell o' sech a bustification as *dat*. Dar warn't re'lly nottin' lef' fo' de rats in de cellar. Das wot Kunnel Wildah say."

Ruth looked at the old man seriously and with a glance that saw right into the white soul that dwelt in his very black and crippled body: "Who launders her frocks so beautifully—and your trousers, Unc' Simmy?" was her innocent if somewhat impudent question.

"Ma ol' woman done hit till she up an' died 'bout eight 'r nine years ago," said the coachman.

"And *you* have done it all since?"

"Oh, ya-as'm! ya-as'm!" exclaimed Unc' Simmy, briskly. "Miss Catalpa wouldn't feel right if she knowed anybody else did fo' her but me—No'm!"

Helen had gone ahead. The old man, his eyes lowered, stood before Ruth in the rain. The girl opened her purse quickly, selected a five dollar bill, and thrust it into his hand.

"Thank you, Unc' Simmy," she said firmly. "That's all I wanted to know."

A tear found a wrinkle in Unc' Simmy's lined face for a sluiceway; but the darkey was still smiling. "Lor' bress you', honey!" he murmured. "I dunno wot Unc' Simmy would do if 'twarn't fo' yo' rich folks from de Norf. Ah got a lot to t'ank you-uns for 'sides ma freedom! An' so's Miss Catalpa," he added, "on'y she don't know it."

"Come along, Ruth!" cried Helen, hopping into the old carriage, the cover of which was now lifted and tied into place. Then, when Ruth joined her and Unc' Simmy climbed to his seat and spread the oilcloth over his knees, she added, in a whisper: "I saw you, Ruth Fielding! Five dollars! Talk about *me* being extravagant. Why, I gave him only two dollars for the whole ride."

"It was worth five to meet Miss Catalpa, wasn't it?" returned her chum, placidly. And in her own mind she was already thinking up a scheme by which the faithful old negro should be more substantially helped in his lifework of caring for his blind mistress.

CHAPTER VIII

UNDER THE UMBRELLA

THE rain had not stopped—not by any means. Ruth and Helen had never seen so much water fall in so short a time. The roadway, when Unc' Simmy drove out into it through the ruined gateway, was flooded from side to side. It was like driving through a red, muddy stream.

But the two girls were comparatively dry under the carriage top. They looked out at the drenched country side with interest, meantime talking together about the Lady of the Gatehouse, by which term they ever after spoke of Miss Catalpa.

"The last of one of the F.F.V.'s, I suppose," suggested Helen. "I wonder if Nettie's Aunt Rachel knows her. Nettie says Aunt Rachel knows everybody who *is* anybody, in the South."

"I fancy this family got through being well-known years ago. The poor little lady has been lost sight of, I suppose," Ruth said.

"Yes. All her old friends are dead."

"Except this old friend sitting up in front of us," Ruth said, smiling.

"Yes. Isn't he an old dear?" whispered Helen. "But I wonder if he shows his Miss Catalpa off to all the Northern people who come to the Point?"

Ruth was silent on this matter. Helen did not suspect yet what Ruth had discovered—that Unc' Simmy was the sole support of the little, blind lady; and Ruth thought she would not tell her chum just now. She wanted to think of some way of materially helping both the old coachman and the Lady of the Gatehouse.

Suddenly Helen uttered a squeal of surprise, and grabbed her friend's arm:

"Do look there, Ruth Fielding! Whom does that look like?"

Ruth came to her side of the carriage and craned her head out of the window to look forward. In the roadway on that side, a few yards ahead of the ambling horse, strode a figure in the rain that could not be mistaken. So narrow and mannish was the pedestrian that a stranger would scarcely think it a woman. The skirt clung to the rail-like limbs, while the straight coat and silk hat helped to make Miss Miggs look extremely like a man.

"And wet! That's no name for it," giggled Helen. "She's saturated right to the bone—and plenty of bone she has to be saturated to. Let's give her three cheers as we go by, Ruth."

"You horrid girl! nothing of the kind," cried

Ruth Fielding, quite exercised. "We must take her in with us—the carriage will hold three. Unc' Simmy!"

"You're the greatest girl," groaned Helen. "You might return good for evil for a year with this person and it would do no good."

"It always does good," responded Ruth. "Unc' Simmy!"

"To whom, I'd like to know?" demanded Helen.

"To *me*," snapped Ruth, and this time when she raised her voice she made the old darkey hear.

"Ya-as'm! ya-as'm!" he cried, turning and pulling the old horse down to a welcome walk.

"Let that lady get in here, Unc' Simmy. We'll take her to the hotel."

"Sho' nuff! Sartainly," agreed the coachman, and with a flourish he stopped beside the woman who was fairly wading through a muddy river.

The rain was coming down harder again. It did not thunder and lightning much, but the rainfall was fairly appalling to these visitors from the North.

"Do get in, quick!" cried Ruth, opening the low door and peering out from the semi-gloom of the hood.

The school teacher from New England understood instantly what the invitation meant. She plunged toward the carriage and was half inside

before she saw who had rescued her from the deluge.

"Get in! get in!" urged Ruth. "Unc' Simmy will take us right to the hotel."

Miss Miggs fairly snorted. "What! you? I wouldn't ride with you in this carriage if we were in the middle of the Atlantic!"

She backed out and stepped right into a puddle of water as deep as her ankles! The excited scream she gave made Helen burst into suppressed laughter. Hearing the girl, the woman glared at her in a way that excited the laughter of the careless Helen to an even greater height.

"Oh, drive on! drive on!" she gasped. "Let her swim if she wants to."

But Unc' Simmy would not do this unless Ruth said so. He looked down at the half submerged school teacher from his seat and exclaimed:

"Wal, now! das one foolish woman, das sho' is! Why don' she git under kiver when she's 'vited t' do so?"

Just then a new actor appeared on the scene. A big umbrella came into view and its bearer crossed the road, splashing through the accumulated water without regard to the wetting of his own feet and legs.

He gave the half-submerged woman a hand and drew her out to the side of the road, and upon a comparatively dry spot. He had some difficulty

with the umbrella just then and raised it high enough for the two girls in the carriage to see his face.

"Oh, Ruthie, look there!" whispered Helen, as the horse started forward. "See who it is!"

"It's Curly—it's surely Curly Smith," muttered Ruth.

"That's what I tell you," whispered Helen, fiercely. "And now we can't speak to him."

"Not with that Miss Miggs in the way. She is mean enough to tell the police who he is."

"Never mind," cried Helen, exultantly, "he got ashore from the fishing boat."

"But I wonder if he has any money left—and what he will do now. The police may still be looking for him."

"Oh, a boy as smart as he is would *never* get caught by the police," declared Helen, in delight. "I only wish I could speak to him and tell him how glad I am he escaped arrest."

"You're an awful-talking girl," sighed Ruth, as the old horse jogged on. "I wish I could get him to go back to his grandmother—and go back to show the people up there that he is innocent."

"That does all very well to talk about, Ruth Fielding!" cried Helen. "But suppose he can't *prove* himself innocent? Do you want the poor boy to go to jail and stay there the rest of his life?"

CHAPTER IX

SUNSHINE AT THE GATEHOUSE

THE shower was over when Unc' Simmy stopped before the hotel veranda. The two girls were rather bedraggled in appearance; but what would Miss Miggs look like when *she* arrived!

"I hope we won't see that mean thing any more," Helen declared. "She is our Nemesis, I do believe."

"Don't let her worry you. She surely punished herself this time," said Ruth, getting down. "Good-bye Unc' Simmy. Come for us again to-morrow—only I hope it won't rain."

"Ya-as'm! ya-as'm! T'ankee ma'am!" responded the darkey, and when Helen had likewise alighted, he rattled away.

"Goodness!" laughed Helen. "Are you so much in love with that old outfit that you want to ride in it again, Ruthie Fielding?"

"I want to see Miss Catalpa again—don't you?" returned her chum. "And I would not go to the gatehouse with anybody but Unc' Simmy. It would be impudent to do so."

"Oh—yes! that's so," admitted Helen. "Come on to luncheon. I have Heavy Stone's appetite, right now!"

"If so, what will poor Heavy do?" asked Ruth, smiling. "This must be about the time she wishes to exercise her own appetite at Lighthouse Point. Would you deprive her, my dear, of any gastronomic pleasure?"

"Woo-o-o!" blew Helen, making a noise like a whistle. "All ashore that's going ashore! What big words you do use, Ruth. At any rate, let us partake of the eatables supplied by this hostlery. Come on!"

But they went up to their rooms first to "prink and putter" as Tom always called it.

"Dear old Tom!" sighed his twin. "How I miss him. And what fun we'd have if he were along. Sorry Nettie's Aunt Rachel doesn't like boys enough to have made up a mixed party."

"You're the only 'mixed' party I see around here," laughed Ruth. "But I wish Tom *were* here. He'd know just how to get at Curly Smith and do something for him."

"That's right! I wish he were here," sighed Helen.

"Never mind," laughed Ruth. "Don't let it take away that famous appetite you just claimed to have. Come on."

The girls went down and ventured into one of

the dining rooms. A smiling colored waiter—"at so much per smile," as Ruth whispered—welcomed them at the door and seated them at rather a large table. This had been selected for them because their party would soon be augmented.

And this, in fact, happened before night. The girls were lolling in content and happiness upon the veranda when the train came in bringing among other passengers Mrs. Parsons and Nettie.

Mrs. Parsons was a dark-haired and olive-skinned lady, who had been a famous beauty in her youth, and a belle in her part of South Carolina. Rachel Merredith had been quite famous, indeed, in several social centers, and she was well known in Washington and Richmond, as well as in the more southern cities.

She greeted Helen kindly, but warmly kissed Ruth, having become an admirer of the girl of the Red Mill some time before.

"Here's my clever little girl," she said, in her soft, drawling way. "I declare! Ev'ry time I put on my necklace I think of you, Ruthie Fielding, and how greatly beholden to you I am. I tell Nettie, here, that when *she* receives our heirloom at her coming-out party, she will thank you, too."

"I don't have to wait till then, Aunt Rachel!" cried Nettie, squeezing the plump shoulders of the girl of the Red Mill. "Isn't it nice to see you both again? How jolly!"

"That's a new word Nettie got up No'th," said her Aunt Rachel. "Tell me, dears: Have they treated you right, here at the hotel?"

The girls assured her that the management had been very kind to them. Then the question was asked: What had they done to kill time?

Helen rattled off a dozen things she and Ruth had dabbled in that afternoon—or, "evening" as the Virginians say; but it was Ruth who mentioned their ride in the rain with old Unc' Simmy.

"To the gatehouse? Where is that?" asked Aunt Rachel, lazily.

Between bursts of laughter Helen tried to tell her about the queer old negro and his dilapidated turnout; but it was Ruth who softly explained to Mrs. Parsons about Miss Catalpa and the faithful old darkey's relations to her.

"Grogan?" repeated the lady. "Yes, yes, I remember the name. Who doesn't? Major Grogan, her father, was a famous leader in the Lost Cause. Oh, dear me, Ruthie! We are still so poor in the South that the family of many a hero has come down to want. Catalpa Grogan? And you say she is blind?"

"She said we might come again and see her before we left the Point," suggested Ruth, gently.

Mrs. Rachel Parsons looked at her understandingly. "Quite right, my dear. We *will* go. I will find out about this lawyer, Colonel Wilder,

and he can probably tell me all we need to know. She and the old negro shall be helped—that is the least we can do."

So, the next morning, all in the glorious sunshine that is usually the weather condition at Old Point Comfort, the party climbed into Unc' Simmy's old barouche and set out on the drive. Mrs. Parsons accepted the dilapidated turnout as quite a matter of course.

"Don't fret about *me,* girls," she said, when Helen said that they should have taken a different equipage.

Ruth had already begun to get the "slant" of the Southern mind. The Southerners respected themselves, and were inordinately proud of their name and blood; but they could cheerfully go without many of the conveniences of life which Northerners would consider a distinct privation. Poverty among them was no disgrace; rather, it was to be expected. They cheerfully made the best of it, and enjoyed what good things they had without allowing caviling care to corrode their pleasure.

The sunshine drenched them as they rolled over the now dusty road, as the rain had drenched the chums the day before. Yonder was the hole beside the roadway into which Miss Miggs had been half submerged, and from which she was rescued by the unfortunate Curly Smith.

Helen hilariously related this incident to Nettie and her aunt. But, warned by Ruth, she said nothing about the identity of the boy.

"I hope we shall not meet that woman again," Ruth said, with a sigh. "She surely would make a scene, Mrs. Parsons. You don't know how mean she can be."

"And a school teacher?" was the reply. "Fancy!"

They arrived at the gatehouse and Ruth begged Unc' Simmy to stop and ask if Miss Catalpa would receive them.

"Give her my card, too, boy," said Mrs. Parsons, as the smiling old man climbed down from his seat.

"Ya-as'm! ya-as'm!" said Unc' Simmy, rolling his eyes, for he saw that Mrs. Parsons was "one of de quality," as he expressed it. "Sho' will."

They were not kept waiting long. Miss Grogan was too much the lady to strive for effect. She received them, as she had the girls, on her porch; but this time in the sunshine.

It was a beautiful old front yard, hidden by an untrimmed hedge from the highway; and the end of the porch where the blind woman sat was now dressed with several old chairs that her guests might sit down. It was likely that Unc' Simmy had brought these out himself, foretelling that there would be visitors.

"I am glad to see you," Miss Catalpa said. She remembered Ruth and Helen when she clasped their hands, distinguishing between them, although she had "seen" them but once.

To Mrs. Parsons she confessed: "These young girls came in the rain and cheered me up. I love the young. Don't you, ma'am?"

"I do," sighed Aunt Rachel. "I'd give anything for my own youth."

"No, no," returned Miss Catalpa, shaking her head. "Life gets better as we grow mellow. That's what I tell them all. I do not regret my youth, although 'twas spent comparatively free from care. And now——"

She waved the knitting in her hand, and laughed —her low, bird-like call. "The good Lord will provide. He always has."

Mrs. Parsons, being a Southerner herself, could talk confidentially to Miss Catalpa. It seemed that several names were known to them in common; and the visitor from South Carolina learned how and where to find the particular "Kunnel Wildah" who had the disposal of Miss Catalpa's affairs in his hands.

The party had a very pleasant visit with the blind woman. Unc' Simmy appeared suddenly before them, his coachman's coat and gloves discarded, and a rusty black coat in place of the livery. He bore a tray with high, beautifully thin,

tinkling glasses of lemonade, with a sprig of mint in each.

"Nobody makes lemonade quite like Uncle Simmy," Miss Catalpa said kindly, and the old negro's face shone like a polished kitchen range at the praise. It was evident that he fairly worshiped his mistress.

The visitors left at last. Helen understood now why they had come. That afternoon the girls were left to their own devices while Mrs. Parsons sought out Colonel Wilder and made some provision for helping in the support of Miss Catalpa and her old servant.

"No, my dear," she said to Ruth. "You may help a little; but not much. Wait until you become a self-supporting woman—as you will be, I know. Then you can have the full pleasure of helping other people as you desire. I can only enjoy it because my cotton fields have made me rich. When we use money that has been left to us, or given to us in some way, for charitable purposes, we lose the sweeter taste of giving away that which we have actually earned.

"And I thank you, my dear," she added, "for giving me the opportunity of helping Miss Grogan and Uncle Simmy."

CHAPTER X

AN ADVENTURE IN NORFOLK

THE party was off on its real tour into Dixie the next day. They were to take the route in a leisurely fashion to the Merredith plantation, and, as Nettie laughingly put it, "would go all around Robin Hood's barn" to reach that South Carolinian Garden of Eden.

"But we want you to really *see* something of the South on the way; it will be so warm—or, will seem so to you No'therners—when you come back, that you will only be thinking of taking the steamer at Norfolk for New York.

"Now you shall see something of Richmond and Charleston, anyway," concluded the Louisiana girl. "And next winter I hope you'll go home with me to my own canebrakes and bayous. *Then* we'll have a good time, I assure you."

Ruth and Helen were having a good time. Everybody about the hotel treated them like grown-up young ladies—and of course such deferential attentions delighted two school-girls just set free from the scholastic yoke.

They went across the bay on the ferry and landed at Norfolk. A trip to the Navy Yard was the first thing, and as Mrs. Parsons knew some of the officers there, the party was very courteously treated. They might have visited the war vessels lying in Hampton Roads; but it seemed so hot on the water that the chums from the North voted for a trip by surface car to Norfolk's City Park.

The lawns had not yet been burned brown and the trees were beautifully leaved out. The park was a pleasant place and in it is one of the best small zoölogical parks in the East. The deer herd was particularly fine—such pretty, graceful creatures! All would have gone well had not Helen received an unexpected fright as they were watching the beautiful beasts.

"You would better not stand so near that grating, Helen," Nettie told her, as they were in front of the fence of the deer range.

"How am I going to feed this pretty, soft-nosed thing with grass if I *don't* stand near?" demanded Helen.

"But you don't *have* to feed the deer," laughed Nettie.

"No. But there's no sign that says you sha'n't," complained Helen. "And I don't see——"

Just then there was a fierce whistle and a big stag charged. Helen looked all around—save in the right direction—for the sound. She was

leaning against the wire fence, but with her head turned so that she did not see the gentle little doe bound away as her master came savagely down the slope.

The next instant the brute crashed against the fence and the shock of his collision sent Helen to the ground. Although the angry stag was on the other side of the woven-wire fence, so savage did he appear that other people standing about ran screaming away.

The stag was tearing up the sod with his fore-feet and throwing himself against the shaking fence as though determined to get at the prostrate Helen.

The latter was really hurt a little, and so badly frightened that she could not arise instantly. Nettie was the nearest of her party; but she was trembling and crying. Ruth was too far away, as was Mrs. Parsons, to help her chum immediately, though she started running in her direction.

But there was a rescuer at hand. A boy in a faded suit of overalls, who must have been working near, ran down to drag the frightened girl away from the fence. As he passed an old gentleman on the walk he seized the latter's cane and darting between Helen and the fence, dealt the angry stag a heavy blow upon the nose.

Although the wire-fence saved the beast from serious injury, the blow was heavy enough to make

him fall back and cease his charges against the wire netting. Then the boy helped Helen to her feet.

"Oh!" shrieked the frightened girl. And after that, although the boy quickly slipped away through the gathering crowd, and out of sight, Helen said no other word.

"Oh, my dear!" gasped Ruth, reaching her. "You did not even thank him."

"I know it," whispered Helen.

"Are—are you hurt, dear?"

"Only my dignity is hurt," confessed her chum, beginning to laugh hysterically.

"But that boy——"

"Hush, Ruthie!" begged Helen, her lips close to her chum's ear. "Do you know who he was?"

"Why—I——Of course not! I did not see his face."

"It was Curly. Don't say a word," breathed Helen. "Here comes a policeman."

Ruth was as much amazed as Helen at the unexpected appearance of Henry Smith. He was constantly bobbing up before them just like an imp in a pantomime.

Their friends hurried the chums away from the caged deer and the crowd that had gathered. Helen had a few bruises but was not, fortunately, really injured. But she confessed that she had seen all the deer she cared to see for the time.

"And I thought they were such gentle, affectionate creatures," she sighed. "Why, that one was as savage as a bear!"

They returned to the water-front and went aboard the Richmond boat in good season for dinner. Ruth and Helen were rather used to boat travel they thought by this time, and they found this smaller craft quite as pleasant as the big steamer on which they had come down the coast.

While they were at table in the saloon the boat started, and so nicely was it eased off, and so quiet was the water, that the girls had no idea the vessel had started.

The girls ran out on deck, arranged a comfortable place for Mrs. Parsons, and there watched the panoramic view of the roads and the shores until darkness fell.

"We shall miss many of the beauties of the James River plantations and towns," Mrs. Parsons said; "by taking this night boat; but we shall have a good night's sleep and see more of Richmond to-morrow than we otherwise could."

The chums did not have quite as much freedom on the river trip as they did coming down on the New Union Line boat; for Mrs. Parsons insisted upon an early bedtime. She would not have liked their sitting out on the deck alone at a late hour. She did not believe in too much freedom for young girls of her niece's age.

However, she was very pleasant to travel with. Ruth and Helen marveled at the attention Mrs. Parsons received from all the employees of the boat, both white and black.

"And she doesn't have to tip extravagantly to get service," Ruth pointed out to Helen. "You see, these darkeys consider it an honor to attend Mrs. Parsons. We Northerners are interlopers, after all; they sell us their servile attentions at a high price; but they are glad to serve the descendants of their old masters. There is a bond between the whites and blacks of the South that we cannot quite understand."

"I guess we're too independent and want to help ourselves too much," Helen said. "You let me alone, Ruth Fielding, and I'll loll around just like Nettie does and let the colored people fetch and carry for me."

"You lazy little thing!" Ruth threw at her, laughing. "It doesn't become your father's daughter to long for such methods and habits. Goodness! the negroes themselves are so slow they give me the fidgets."

In the morning they awoke from sleep as the boat was being docked. It was another beautiful, sunshiny day. The negro dockhands lolled upon the wharves. Up the river they could see the bridge to Manchester and the rapids, up which no boat could sail.

They ate their breakfast in a leisurely manner on the boat, and then took an open carriage on Main Street, where the sickish odor of the tobacco factories was all that spoiled the ride.

They rode east and passed the site of the old Libby tobacco warehouse—execrated by the prisoners during the Civil War as "Libby Prison"—and saw, too, Libby Hill Park, Marshall's Park and the beautiful Chimborazo reservation.

Coming back they climbed the Broad Street hill and stopped at the hotel, remaining there for rest and luncheon. Then the girls walked on Broad Street and saw the shops and bought a few souvenirs and some needfuls, while Mrs. Parsons remained in the hotel. The sun was hot, but the air was dry and invigorating.

Later in the afternoon the whole party went down into Capitol Square—a very beautiful park, in which are located the state-house, the library, and the Washington Monument.

"Besides," declared Helen, "'most a million squirrels. Did you ever see so many of the little dears? And see how tame they are."

The squirrels and the children with their black nurses in Capitol Square are among the pleasantest sights of Richmond. There was the old bell tower, too, near the North Twelfth Street side, which interested the girls, and they walked back to the hotel by way of Franklin Street and saw the old home

of General Robert E. Lee and some other famous dwellings.

The party was to remain one night in Richmond, and in the morning the girls went alone to the Confederate Museum on Clay Street, which during the Civil War was the "White House of the Confederacy."

"I leave you young people to do the rest of the sightseeing," Mrs. Parsons said, and took her breakfast in bed, waited on by a colored maid.

But at noon she appeared, trim and fresh again, in time for luncheon and the ride to the railway station where they took the train for the South.

"Now we're off for the Land of Cotton!" cried Helen. "This dip into Dixie so far has only been a taste. What adventures are before us now, do you suppose, Ruth?"

Her chum could not tell her. Indeed, neither of them could have imagined quite what was to happen to them before they again turned their faces north for the return journey.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE MERREDITH PLANTATION

THE noontide bell at some distant cotton house sent a solemn note—like an alarm—ringing across the lowlands. The warm, sweet smell of the brakes almost overpowered the girls from the North. And lulling their senses, too, were the bird-notes, seemingly from every tree and bush.

Long festoons of moss hung from some of the wide-armed trees. Here and there, cleared hammocks were shaded by mighty oaks which may have been standing when the first white settlers on this coast of the New World established themselves at Georgetown, not many miles away.

Riding in the comfortable open carriage, behind a handsome pair of bay horses, and driven by a liveried coachman with a footman likewise caparisoned on the seat beside him, Ruth and Helen, as guests of Mrs. Rachel Parsons and Nettie, had already come twenty miles from the railroad station.

Despite the moisture and the heat, the girls from the North were enjoying themselves hugely.

The week that had passed since they had met Nettie and her aunt at Old Point Comfort had been a most delightful one for the chums.

The long railroad journey south from Richmond had been broken by stops at points of interest, including New Bern, Wilmington, Pee Dee, and finally Charleston. The latter city had interested the girls immensely—quite as much as Richmond.

After two days there, the party had come back as far as Lanes and had there taken the branch road for Georgetown, at the mouth of the Pee Dee River, one of the oldest towns in the South, and around which linger many memories of Revolutionary days. The guests would not see this old town until a later date, however.

Leaving the train at a small station in the forest, they were met by this handsome equipage and were now approaching the Merredith plantation. Ruth, as silent as her companions, was contrasting in her own mind this beautiful carriage and pair with the old Grogan barouche, the knock-kneed horse, and Unc' Simmy.

"Two phases of the new South," she thought, for Ruth was rather prone to a kind of mental problem that does not usually interest young folk of her age. "Here is the progressive, up-to-date, money-making class represented by Mrs. Parsons, reviving the ancient fortunes of her house. While

poor Miss Catalpa and her single faithful servant represent the helpless and hopeless class, ruined by the war and—probably—ruined before the war, only they had not found it out!

"The Southern families who are reviving will, in time, be wealthier than they were under the old regime. But how many poor people like Miss Catalpa there must be scattered through this Dixieland!"

The party soon came to where two huge oaks, scarred deeply by the axe, intermingled their branches over the roadway.

"This is our gateway," said Mrs. Parsons. "Here is the beginning of the Merredith plantation."

"Oh, Mrs. Parsons!" cried Helen, pointing to one side. "What is that pole there? Or is it a dead tree?"

"A dead pine. And it has been dead more than a hundred years, yet it still stands," explained the lady. "They say that to its lowest branch was hung a British spy in Revolutionary times—'as high as Haman'; but re'lly, how they ever climbed so high to affix the rope over the limb, I cannot say."

She spoke to the coachman in a minute: "Jeffreys!"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the black man.

"Drive by the quarters." She said "quahtahs."

"It will give the children a chance to see us, and Dilsey and Patrick Henry won't want them coming to the Big House and littering up the lawn."

"Yes, ma'am," said the coachman and swung the horses into a by-road.

All the drives were beautifully kept. If there chanced to be a piece of grass in a forest opening, it was clipped like a lawn. This end of the great plantation was kept as well as an English park. Occasionally they saw men at work amid the groves of lovely shade trees.

Suddenly there burst upon their view a sloping upland, dotted here and there with groups of outbuildings and stables, checkered by fenced pastures in which sleek cattle and horses grazed. There were truck patches, too, belonging to the quarters, where the negroes lived.

These whitewashed cabins, with their attendant chicken-runs and pig-pens—all whitewashed, too—were near at hand. As the carriage swung out of the forest, the hum of a busy village broke upon the ears of the girls, as the sight of all this rich and rolling upland burst upon their view.

The green trees and the green grass contrasted with the white cots made a delightfully cool picture for the eye.

The mistress' equipage was sighted immediately and there boiled out of the cabins a seemingly never-ending army of children and dogs. The

dogs were all of the hound breed, and the children were of one variety, too—brown, bare-legged pickaninnies, about all of a size, and most of them bow-legged.

But they were a laughing, happy crowd as they came tearing along the lane to meet the carriage. The hullabaloo of the dogs and children brought the mothers to the cabin doors, or around from their washtubs at the rear of the cabins. They, too, were smiling and—many of them—in clean frocks and new bandanas, prepared to meet "de quality."

And there were so many of them, bowing and smiling at "Mistis," as they called Mrs. Parsons, and bidding her welcome! It was like a village turning out to greet the feudal owner of the property. Mrs. Parsons seemed to know all of them by name, and she shook hands with the older women, and spoke particularly to some of the young women with babies in their arms. Noticeably there were no children over seven or eight years old at home; nor were there any young men or women, save the few married girls with infants. Everybody else was at work in the fields, Ruth learned. And she learned, too, in time, that the Merredith plantation was one of the largest cotton farms in the state, and one of the most productive.

A little later, however, as they rode on, the visi-

tors learned that there was something beside cotton grown on the estate. On the upland they came to a field of corn. It extended farther than their eyes could see—a waving, black-green, waist-high sea, its blades clashing like a forest of green swords.

"How many acres in this piece, Jeffreys?" asked Mrs. Parsons, of the coachman, seeing that the two Northern girls were interested.

"Four hundred acres, ma'am. I hear Mistah Lomaine say so."

"We passed huge corn and grain fields when we went West to Silver Ranch," Ruth said. "But mostly in the night, I believe; and the corn was not in the same stage of growth as this."

"Cotton is still king in the South," laughed Mrs. Parsons; "but Corn has become his prime-minister. I believe some of our bottom lands will raise even better corn than this."

They rode steadily on, having taken a considerable sweep around to see the "quarters," and now approached the Big House. And it *was* big! Ruth and Helen never heard it called anything but the "Big House" by anybody on the plantation.

It was set upon a low mound in a grove of whispering trees. The lawns about it were like velvet; the grass was of that old-fashioned, short, "door-yard" kind which finds root in many door-yards of the South and spreads slowly and surely

where the land is strong enough to sustain it. It needs little attention from the lawnmower, but makes a thick, velvety carpet.

The roots of some of the old trees had been exposed so many years that their upper surface had rotted away, and in the rich mold thus made the grass had taken root, upholstering low, inviting seats with its green velvet.

The house itself—mansion it had better be called—was painted white, of course, even to its brick foundation. The massive roof of the veranda which sheltered the second-floor windows as well as those of the first floor on the front of the main building, was upheld by six great fluted pillars as sound now as when cut from an equal number of forest monarchs and raised into place, a hundred years before.

On either side wings were built on to the main house, each big enough for the largest family Ruth Fielding had ever known! What could possibly be done with all those bedrooms upstairs was a mystery to her inquiring mind until Nettie told her that, in the old slavery days, long before the war, and when people traveled only on horseback and by coach, a house party at the Merredith plantation meant the inviting for a week or two of twenty-five ladies and as many gentlemen, and each had his or her black attendant—valet, or maid—that had to be sheltered in the Big House at night,

although coachmen and footmen, and other "outriders" could find room in the cabins, or stables.

Both wings were closed now; but the windows remained dressed, for Mrs. Parsons would not allow any part of the old house to look ugly and forlorn. Twice a year an army of colored women went through the empty rooms and cleaned and scoured, just as though again a vast company were expected.

The small retinue of house servants met the carriage at the foot of the broad steps. They were mostly smiling young negroes, the men in livery and the girls in cotton gowns, stiffly starched aprons, and white caps. There was a broad, unctious looking, mahogany colored "Mammy" on the top step, and a gray-wooled, bent, old negro at the door of the carriage when it stopped.

"Good day, ma'am! Good-day!" said the old man to Mrs. Parsons. "My duty to you."

He waved away the officious footman and insisted upon helping the mistress of the Merredith plantation down with all the pompous service of a major-domo.

"We are all well, Patrick Henry," said Aunt Rachel. "Is everything right on the plantation?"

"Yes'm; yes'm. I'll be proud to make my report at any time, ma'am."

"Oh, to-morrow, I pray, Patrick Henry," cried Mrs. Parsons. She ran lightly up the steps and

the big colored woman, waiting there with smiling lips but overflowing eyes, gathered the lady to her broad bosom in a bearlike hug.

"Ma honey-gal! Ma little mistis!" she crooned, rocking the white woman's head to and fro upon her bosom. "Dilsey don't reckon she'll welcome yo' here so bery many mo' times; but she's sho' glad of dishyer one!"

"You are good for many years more, you know it, Mammy Dilsey!" laughed Mrs. Parsons, breathlessly.

"Here's Miss Nettie," she said, "and two of her school friends—Miss Ruth and Miss Helen. Of course, there is no need to ask you, Mammy Dilsey, if everything is ready for them?"

"Sho', chile!" chuckled the old negress. "Yo' knows I wouldn't fo'git nottin' like dat. De quality allus is treated proper at Mer'dith. Come along, honeys; dere's time t' res' yo'selfs an' dress fo' dinner. We gwine t' gib yo' sech anudder dinner as yo' ain' seen, Miss Rachel, since yo' was yere airly in de spring. I know bery well yo' been stahvin' ob yo'self in dem hotels in de Norf all dishyer w'ile."

CHAPTER XII

THE BOY AT THE WAREHOUSE

"Goodness me!" cried Helen to Nettie. "How do you get along with so many of these colored people under foot? I had thought it might be fun to have so many servants; but I don't believe I could stand it."

"Oh, I don't think Aunt Rachel has too many," Nettie said carelessly. "We don't mind having them around. As long as their faces are smiling and we know they are happy, we don't mind. You see, we Southerners actually like the negroes; you Northerners only *say* you do."

"Hear! hear!" cried Ruth. "There is a difference."

"Well," pouted Helen, "I don't know that I have any dislike for them. I—I guess maybe I'm not just used to them."

"It takes several generations of familiarity, I reckon," said Nettie, with some gravity, "to breed the feeling we Southerners have for the children of our old slaves. Slavery seems to have been a terrible institution to you Northern girls; but we

feel that the vast majority of the negroes were better off in those days than they are now.

"Slavery after all is a condition of the mind," Nettie said. "Those blacks who were intelligent in the old days perhaps should have had their freedom. But few slaves went with empty stomachs in the old days, or had to worry about shelter.

"It is different now. Whites as well as blacks throughout the South often go hungry. Aunt Rachel keeps many more people on the Merredith plantation than she really needs to work it, so that there shall be fewer starving families on the outskirts of the estate."

"Your aunt is a dear, good woman," Ruth said warmly. "I am sure whatever she does is right."

The girls were sitting in comfortable rocking chairs on the broad veranda in the cool of the evening. A mocking-bird began to sing in a tree near by and the three friends broke off their conversation to listen to him.

"I'd have loved to see one of those grand companies of ladies and gentlemen who used to visit here," said Helen, after a little. "Such a week-end party as that must have been worth while."

"And you don't like darkeys!" cried Nettie, laughing merrily. "Why, in those times the place was alive with them. This piece of gravel before the house was haunted by every darkey from the quarters. The gravel was worked like a regular

silver-mine. No gentleman mounted his horse before the door here without scattering a handful of silver to the darkeys. Even now, the men working for Aunt Rachel, sometimes find tarnished old silver pieces as they rake over the gravel."

"Dear me! let's go silver-mining, Ruthie," cried Helen. "I need to have my purse replenished already."

"And if you found any money here you would give it to that bright little girl who waited on us so nicely upstairs," laughed Ruth.

"Of course. That's what I want it for," confessed Helen.

"Your mind is perfectly adjusted to a system of slavery, my dear," Nettie said to Helen Cameron. "Here is my father's picture of what slavery meant to the South. He says he was walking along a street in New Orleans years ago and saw an old gentleman grubbing in the mud of a gutter with his cane. The old gentleman finally turned up a half dollar which had been dropped there; and after picking it up and polishing it on his handkerchief to make sure it was good money, he tossed it to the nearest negro idling on the street corner.

"*That* was slavery. It was the whites who were enslaved to the blacks, after all. Both were bound by the system; but it was the negro who got the best of it, for every half dollar that the white man

earned he had to pay for food to keep his slaves. Now," added Nettie, smiling, "the law even lets the bad white man cheat the ignorant black out of the wages he earns, and the poor black may starve."

"Dear me!" cried Helen, "we're getting as sociological as one of Miss Brokaw's lectures. Let's not. Keep your information to yourself, please, Miss Parsons. Positively I refuse to learn anything about social conditions in the South while I am in the Land of Cotton. I'll get my information from text-books and at a distance. This is too beautiful a landscape to have it spoiled by statistics and examples, or any other *such trash!*"

By and by, as the darkness came swiftly (so swiftly that it surprised the visitors from the North) a bird flew heavily out of the lowlands and pitched upon a dead limb near the house. At once the plaintive cry of "whip-poor-will!" resounded through the night, and Ruth and Helen began to count the number of times in succession the bird uttered its somber note without a break.

Usually the count numbered from forty-three to forty-seven—never an even number; but Nettie said she had heard one demand "the castigation of poor William" more than seventy times before stopping.

The whippoorwill flew to other "pitches" near the house, and once actually lit upon the roof to

utter his love-call; but never, Nettie told the other girls, would the bird alight upon a live branch.

Just before his cry began they could hear him "cluck! cluck! cluck!" just like an old hen—or, as Ruth suggested—"like a rheumatic old clock getting ready to strike."

"He's clearing his voice," declared Helen. "Now! off he goes. Isn't he funny?"

"I wonder what the little whippoorwillies are like?" asked Ruth.

"I don't know. I never saw the young. But I've seen a nest," said Nettie. "The whippoorwill makes it right out in the open, on the top of an old stump, or on a boulder. There the female lays the eggs and shelters them and the young from the storms with her own body."

"My, I'd like to see one!" exclaimed Helen.

But there were more interesting things than the the nest of the whippoorwill to see about the Merredith plantation. And the sightseeing began the next morning, before the sun had been long up.

Immediately after breakfast, while it was still cool, the horses appeared on the gravel before the great door, each held by a grinning negro lad from the stables. No Southern plantation would be properly equipped without a plentiful supply of good riding stock, and Mrs. Parsons had bred some rather famous horses during the time she had governed her ancestral estate.

Ruth and Helen had learned to ride well when they visited Silver Ranch some years before; so they were not afraid to mount the spirited animals that danced and curveted upon the gravel. Mr. Lomaine, the superintendent of the estate, and whom the visitors had met the evening before, came pacing along from the stables upon a great, black horse, ready to accompany the three girls upon a tour of inspection.

Mr. Lomaine was a very pleasant gentleman and was dressed in black, wearing a broad-brimmed black hat, riding puttees, and gauntlets. The whip he carried was silver-mounted. He had entire charge of the work on the plantation; but the old negro, Patrick Henry, Mammy Dilsey's husband, had personal care of the house, its belongings, and the other negroes' welfare.

"Come on, girls," cried Nettie, showing more vigor than she usually displayed as she was helped into her saddle by one of the attendants. "I'm just aching for a ride."

They rode, however, with side-saddle, and neither Ruth nor Helen felt as sure of themselves mounted in this way as they had in the West on the cow-ponies belonging to Mr. Bill Hicks.

The morning, however, was delightful. The dogs and little negroes cheered the cavalcade as they passed in sight of the cabins. Had Mr. Lomaine not ordered them back, a dozen or more of

both pickaninnies and canines would have followed "de quality" around the plantation.

They rode down from the corn lands to the cotton fields. Negroes and mules were at work everywhere. "I do say!" gasped Helen. "I didn't know there were so many mules in the whole world. Funny things! with their shaved tails and long ears."

"And hind feet with the itch!" exclaimed Ruth. "I don't want to get near the *dangerous* end of one of those creatures."

The cavalcade followed the roads through the fields of cotton and down to the river bank. Here stood the long cotton warehouse and the gin-house and press, where the cotton is prepared, baled, and stored for the market. The Merredith cotton was shipped direct from the plantation's own dock, and the buyers came here at the selling time to inspect and judge the quality of the output.

The warehouse boss, a long, lean, yellow man with a chin whisker that wabbled in a funny way every time he spoke, came out on the platform to speak with Mr. Lomaine. There were some hands inside trundling baled cotton from one end of the dark warehouse to the other.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Mr. Lomaine, within the girls' hearing, and after a minute or two of desultory conversation with the boss. "Hullo! who's that white boy you got there, Jimson?"

"That boy?" returned the man, with a broad grin. "That's a little, starvin' Yank that come along. I had to feed him; so I thought I'd bettah put him to work. And he kin work—sho' kin!"

Ruth's eye would never have been attracted by the slim figure wheeling the big cotton bale had she not overheard this speech. A boy from the North? And he had curly hair.

It was a very dilapidated figure, indeed, that Ruth watched trundle the bale down the shadowy length of the warehouse. When his load was deposited he wheeled the hand-truck back for another bale. His face was red and he was perspiring. Ruth thought the work must be very arduous for his slight figure.

And then she forgot all about anything but the identity of the boy. It was Henry Smith—"Curly" as he was known about Lumberton, New York. She glanced quickly at her chum. Helen saw the boy, too, and had recognized him as quickly as had Ruth herself.

CHAPTER XIII

RUTH IS TROUBLED

"WHAT shall we do about it?" asked Helen.

"Do about what, dear?"

"You know very well, Ruthie Fielding! You saw him as well as I did," Helen declared.

They were riding slowly back to the Big House after their visit to the river side, and Helen reined her horse close in beside her chum's mount.

"I know what you mean," admitted Ruth, placidly. "Do you think it is necessary for us to say anything—especially where others might hear?"

"But that's Curly!" whispered Helen, fiercely.

"I am sure of it."

"And did you see how he looked? Why, the boy is in rags. He even looks much worse than when we last saw him—when he saved me from that deer at Norfolk," and Helen began to giggle at the recollection.

"Something has happened to poor Curly since then," said Ruth, with a sigh. "I guess he has found out that it is not so much fun to run away as he thought."

"The man said he was starving," sighed Helen.

"He certainly must have been having a hard time," Ruth returned. "I'll write to his grandmother again. Her answer to my letter written at Old Point Comfort has not arrived yet; but I think she ought to know that we have found Curly again."

"And tell her he is ragged and hungry. Maybe it will touch her heart," begged Helen. "But *we* ought to do something for him, Ruth."

"Maybe."

"Of course we should. Why not?"

"It might scare him away if he knew that anybody here had recognized him. It is such a coincidence that he should come right here to this Merredith plantation," Ruth said. "What do you suppose it means? Could he have known that we were coming here, and is he trying to find us?"

"Oh, Ruth! He'd know we would help him, wouldn't he?"

"I didn't think that Curly was the sort of boy to hunt up girl's help in any case," laughed Ruth.

"Don't laugh! it seems so cruel. Hungry!" breathed Helen.

"The boy is learning something," her chum said, with decision. "Now that he is really away from his grandmother, I hope this will teach him a lesson. I don't want any harm to come to Curly Smith; but if he learns that his home is better than

a loose life among strangers, it will be a good thing."

"Why, Ruth!" gasped Helen. "You talk just as though the police were not looking for him."

"Hush! we won't tell everybody that," advised Ruth. "Probably they will never discover him here, in any case. His crime is not so great in the eyes of the law."

"I don't believe he ever did it!" cried Helen.

"Neither do I. It seems to me," Ruth said gravely, "that if he had helped those men commit the robbery, he would have gone away from Lumberton with them."

"That is so!"

"And he shows that he has no criminal friends, or he would not come so far—and all alone. Nor would he have been so forlorn and hungry, if he was willing to steal."

Ruth wrote her letter, as she promised; and she thought a good deal about the boy they had seen at the cotton warehouse. Suppose Curly Smith should take up his wanderings from this place? Suppose the warehouseman, Mr. Jimson, should discharge him? The man had spoken in rather an unfeeling way of the "little, hungry Yank," and Ruth did not know how good at heart the lanky, chin-whiskered man was.

She determined to do something to make it reasonably sure that Curly would remain on the

Merredith plantation until she could hear from his grandmother. Possibly the trouble in Lumberton might be settled. If the railroad had not lost much money—provided it was really proved that Curly had recklessly helped the thieves—the matter might be straightened out if Mrs. Sadoc Smith would refund a portion of the money lost.

And by this time Ruth believed the boy's grandmother might be willing to do just that. It was very natural for her to announce in the first flush of her anger and shame, that she would have nothing more to do with her grandson, but Ruth was quite sure she loved him devotedly, and that her heart would soon be yearning for his graceless self.

Besides, when Mrs. Smith read the letter Ruth wrote, she would know that the wandering boy was in trouble and in poverty. As Helen begged her, Ruth had written these facts "strong." She had made out Curly's case to be as pitiful as possible, and she hoped for results from Lumberton.

Suppose, however, if a forgiving letter came from Mrs. Sadoc Smith, Curly could not then be found at the warehouse on the river side? Ruth thought of this during the heat of the day, when the family at the Big House rested. That siesta after luncheon seemed necessary here, in the warm, moist climate of the river-lands. Ruth awoke about three o'clock, with an idea for action in

Curly Smith's case. She slipped out of the room without disturbing Helen.

Running downstairs she found that nobody had yet descended. Two of the liveried men rose yawning from the mahogany settees in the hall. A downstairs girl dozed with her head on her arms on the center table in one reception room.

"The castle of the Sleeping Beauty," murmured Ruth, smiling, and without speaking to any of the house servants, she ran out.

She knew the way to the stables and there were signs of life there. Two or three of the grooms were currying horses in the yard, and idly talking and laughing. One of them threw down the curry-comb and brush and ran immediately to Ruth as she appeared at the bars.

Ruth recognized him as the boy who had held her horse while she mounted that morning, and she suspected immediately that he had been instructed to be at her beck and call if she expressed any desire for a mount. She asked him if that was so.

"Yes, ma'am. Patrick Henry say fo' me t' 'tend yo' if yo' rode."

"Can I ride out any time?" asked the girl.

He grinned at her widely. "Sho' kin, ma'am," he said. "Dat little bay mare wid de scah on her hip, she at yo' sarbice—an' so's Toby."

"You are Toby?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

"Then saddle the mare for me at once and—stay! can you go with me?"

"Positive got t' go wid yo', miss. Ab-so-lum-lute-ly," declared the negro, gravely. "Dem's ma 'structions f'om Patrick Henry."

"All right, Toby. I want to go back to that cotton warehouse where we stopped this morning. I forgot something."

"Ready in a pig's wink, Miss Ruth," declared the young negro, and ran off to saddle the bay mare and get, for himself, a wicked looking speckled mule.

The bay mare felt just as much refreshed by her siesta as Ruth did. She started when Ruth was in the saddle, seemingly with a determination to break her own record for speed. The girl of the Red Mill, her hat off, her hair flying, and her eyes and cheeks aglow, looked back to see what had become of Toby and the speckled mule.

But she need not have worried about them. Toby had no saddle, and only a rope bridle; but he clung to the mule like a limpet to a rock, with his great-toes between two ribs, "tick'lin' ob 'im up!" as he expressed it to the laughing Ruth, when at last she brought the mare to a halt in sight of the river.

"Dishyer mu-el," declared Toby, "I s'pec could beat out dat mare on a long lane; but I got t' hol'

Mistah Mu-el in, 'cause Patrick Henry done tol' me hit ain' polite t' ride ahaid ob de quality."

He dropped respectfully to the rear when they started again, only calling out to Ruth the turns to take as they rode on. In half an hour they were in sight of the cotton warehouse.

It was just then that the girl almost drew her bay mare to a full stop. It smote her suddenly that she had not made up her mind just how she should approach Curly Smith, the runaway.

CHAPTER XIV

RUTH FINDS A HELPER

THE warehouse foreman, or "boss," was sunning himself on the end platform, just where the lap, lap, lap of the river drowsed upon his ear on one side, and the buzzing of the bees drowsed on the other. He started from his nap at the clatter of hoofs and beheld one of those "little Miss Yanks," as he privately called the visitors to Merredith, reining in her horse before him, with the grinning darkey a proper distance behind.

"Wal, I'll be whip-sawed!" ejaculated Mr. Jimson, under his breath. Then aloud: "Mighty glad t' see yo', miss. It's a pretty evenin', ain't it? What seems t' be the trouble?"

"Oh, no trouble at all," said the girl of the Red Mill, brightly. "I—I just thought I'd stop and speak to you."

"That's handsome of yo'," agreed the man, but with a puzzled look.

"I wanted another ride," went on Ruth, "and I got Toby to take me around this way. Because, you see, I'm curious."

"Is that so, Miss Ruth?" returned the long and lanky man. "Seems t' me we most of us are. What is yo' curiosity aimin' at right now?"

Ruth laughed, as she saw his gray eyes twinkling. But she put on a brave front and said: "I'd dearly love to see into your cotton storehouse. Can't I come in? Are the men working there now?"

"Yes'm. And the boys," said Mr. Jimson, drily.

Ruth had to flush at that. How the boss had guessed her errand she did not know; but she believed he suspected the reason for her visit. It was a moment or two before she could decide whether to confide in him or not.

Meanwhile, Toby held her stirrup and she leaped down and mounted the platform. The negro led the mare and the mule into the shade. Mr. Jimson still smiled lazily at her, and chewed a straw.

Finally, when Ruth was just before the man, she smiled one of her friendly, confiding smiles and he capitulated.

"Miss Ruth," he said, in his soft, Southern drawl, "Jes' what is it yo' want? I saw you an' that other little Miss Yank—beggin' yo' pahdon—lookin' at that rag'muffin I took in yisterday, an' I s'pected that you knowed him."

"Oh, Mr. Jimson! how sharp you are."

"Pretty sharp," admitted the boss, with a sly smile. "I'd like t' know what he's *done.*"

"He's run away from home," Ruth said quickly.

"Ya-as. They mos' allus do. But what did he do 'fore he ran away, Miss Ruth?"

The man's dry, crooked smile held assurance in it. Ruth realized that if she wanted his help—and she did—she must be more open with Mr. Jimson.

"I don't believe that he has really done anything very bad," Ruth said gravely. "It was what he was accused of and the punishment threatening him, which made Curly run away."

"Curly?" repeated Jimson.

"Yes. That's what we call him. His name is Henry Smith."

"I'll be whip-sawed!" exclaimed Jimson. "I like that boy. He give me his real name—he sho' did. Curly Smith he said 'twas. An' yit, *that* 'd be as good a disguise as he could ha' thunk up, mebbe. Smith's a mighty common name, ain't it?"

"Curly always was a frank and truthful boy. But he was full of mischief."

She knew that she had Mr. Jimson's sympathy for the boy now, so she began to tell him all about Curly. The warehouse boss listened without interruption save for an occasional, "sho', now!" or "you don't say!" Her own and Helen's ad-

ventures since they had left home to come South, seemed to amuse Mr. Jimson a great deal, too.

"I'll be whip-sawed!" he exclaimed, at last. "You little Miss Yanks are the beatenes'—I declar'! Never heard tell of sech gals as you are, travelin' about alone—jest as perky as young pa'tridges! Sho' now!"

"My chum and I have gone about a good deal alone. We don't think it so very strange. 'Most always my friend's twin brother is with us."

"Wal, that don't make so much difference," said Mr. Jimson. "Her twin brother? Is he older'n she is?" he added, quite innocently.

"Oh, no," Ruth admitted, stifling a desire to laugh. "My chum and I feel quite confident of finding our way about all right."

"Sho' now! I got a gal at home that's bigger'n older'n you and Miss Helen and her maw wouldn't trust her t' go t' the Big House for a drawin' of tea. She'd plumb git lost," chuckled Mr. Jimson. "But now! about this boy. What d' yo' want t' do about him?"

"Oh, Mr. Jimson!" Ruth cried. "I do so want to be sure that Curly stays here until I can hear from his grandmother. I have written to her and begged her to take him back——"

"An' git him grabbed by the police?" demanded Jimson.

"He ought to go back and fight it out," Ruth

declared firmly. "He ought not to knock about the world, and fall into bad associations as he may, and come to harm. I don't believe he will be punished if he is not guilty."

"It don't a-tall matter whether a man's innocent or guilty," objected Mr. Jimson. "If the police is after him, he's jest natcher'ly *scared.*"

"I suppose so," Ruth admitted. "I would run away myself, I suppose. But I want Curly to go back to Mrs. Sadoc Smith."

"Jest as you say, Miss Ruth. I'll hold on to him," the warehouse boss promised.

"I hope he doesn't see us girls and get frightened, thinking that we'll tell on him," Ruth said.

"I'll see to it that he doesn't skedaddle," Mr. Jimson assured her. "He's sleepin' at my shack nights. I'll lock him in his room."

Ruth laughed at that, and rather ruefully. "That's what his grandmother did," she observed. "But it didn't do any good, you see. He got out of the window and went over the shed roof to the ground. And it was a twenty-foot drop, too."

"Don't yo' fret," said Mr. Jimson. "The win-dah of his room is barred. And he'd half t' drop into the river. By the looks of things," he added, cocking his eye at the treetops, "there's goin' to be plenty of water in this river pretty soon."

Jimson was a prophet. That very night it began to rain.

CHAPTER XV

THE RIDE TO HOLLOWAYS

BEING kept indoors by the rain was not altogether a privation. At least, the three girls staying at the Big House did not find it such.

They became acquainted with Mammy Dilsey during that first day of rain. At least, the girls from the North did; Nettie had been a pet of the old woman for years.

Dilsey was full of old-time stories—just such stories as were calculated to enthrall girls of the age of Ruth Fielding and her friends. For even Ruth, with all her good sense and soberness, loved to hear of pretty ladies, in pretty frocks, and with beautifully dressed gentlemen dancing attendance upon them, such as in the old times often filled Merredith House.

Mammy Dilsey insisted she could remember when men really dressed in satin and lace, and wore wonderfully fluted shirt-bosoms, and fine linen and broadcloth. The pre-Civil War ladies, of course, with their crinolines, and tiny bonnets, and enormous shade-hats must have looked really

beautiful. The girls listened to the tales of the parties at the Big House almost breathlessly.

"An' dat time de Gov'nor come—de *two* Gov'nors come," sighed Mammy Dilsey. "De Gov'nor ob No'th Ca'lina an' de Gov'nor ob So'th Ca'lina——"

"I know what they *said* to each other—those two governors," interrupted Helen, her eyes dancing. "My father told me."

"I dunno wot dey *said,*" said Mammy Dilsey, who did not know the old joke. "But I sho' knows how dey *looked.* Dey was bof such big, upstandin' sort o' men. My-oh-my! Ah tells yo', chillen, dey was a big *breed* o' men in dese pahts in dem days—sho' was.

"Ma Miss Rachel, she been a li'le tinty gal in dem days. Ah car's her in ma arms 'mos' de time. Her maw was weakly-like. An' I could walk up an' down de end o' dis big verandah wid dat mite ob a baby, an' see all dat went on.

"My-oh-my! de splendid car'ages, an' de beautiful horses, an' de fine ladies an' gemmen—dere nebber'll be nothin' like it fo' ol' Mammy Dilsey t' see ag'in twill she gits t' dat Hebenly sho' an' see dat angel band wot de Good Book talks about."

Incidents of this great party at the Merredith plantation, and of other famous entertainments there, were still as fresh in Mammy Dilsey's mind as the occurrences of yesterday.

"Oh, goodness," sighed Helen, "there never will be any fun for girls again. And nowadays the boys only care to go to baseball games, or to go hunting and fishing. They refuse to come at *our* beck and call as they used to in these times Mammy Dilsey tells about."

"I guess we make *our*selves too much like *them*selves," laughed Ruth. "That's why the boys of to-day are different. If chivalry is dead, we women folks have killed it."

"I don't see why," pouted Helen.

"Oh, my dear!" cried her chum. "You want to have your cake and eat it, too. It can't be done. If we girls want the boys to be gallant and dance attendance on us, and cater to our whims—as they certainly did in our grandmothers' days—we must not be rough and ready friends with them: play golf, tennis, swim, run, bat balls, and—and talk slang—the equal of our boy friends in every particular."

"You're so funny, Ruthie," laughed Nettie.

"Lecture by Miss Ruth Fielding, the famous woman's rights advocate," groaned Helen.

"I am not sure I advocate it, my dear," sighed Ruth. " 'I, too, would love and live in Arcady.' "

"Goodness! hear her exude sentiment," gasped Helen. "Who ever thought to live till *that* wonder was born?"

"Maybe, after all, Ruth has the right idea,"

said Nettie, timidly. "My cousin Mapes says that he finds lots of girls who are 'good fellows'; but that when he marries he doesn't want to marry a 'good fellow,' but a *wife*."

"Horrid thing!" Helen declared. "I don't like your cousin Mapes, Nettie."

"I am not sure that a girl might not, after all, fill your cousin's 'bill of particulars,' if she would," Ruth said, laughing. "'Friend Wife' can still be a good comrade, and darn her husband's socks. I guess, after all, not many young fellows would want to marry the kind of girl his grandmother was."

The trio of girls did not spend all their rainy hours with Mammy Dilsey, or in such discussions as the above. Besides, now and then the sun broke through the clouds and then the whole world seemed to steam.

The girls had the big porch to exercise upon, and as soon as it promised any decided change in the weather there were plans for new activities.

Across the river was a place called Holloways —actually a small island. It was quite a resort in the summer, there being a hotel and several cottages, occupied by Georgetown and Charleston people through the hot season.

Mrs. Parsons thought that her young guests would become woefully lonely and "fair ill of Merredith," if they did not soon have some social

diversion, so it was planned to go to Holloways to the week-end "hop" held by the hotel guests and cottagers.

This was nothing like a public dance. Mrs. Parsons would not have approved of that. But the little coterie of hotel guests and the neighbors arranged very pleasant parties which the mistress of the Merredith plantation was not averse to her young folks attending.

As it happened, she herself could not go. A telegram from her lawyers in Charleston called Mrs. Parsons to the city only a few hours before the time set for the party to start for Holloways.

"Now, listen!" cried Aunt Rachel. "You girls shall not be disappointed—no, indeed! Mrs. Holloway will herself act as your chaperon and will take good care of you. We should remain at her hotel over night, in any case."

"But we won't have half so much fun if you don't go, Mrs. Parsons," Helen said.

"Nonsense! nonsense! what trio of girls was ever enamored of a strict duenna like me?" and Mrs. Parsons laughed. "I'll send one of the boys on ahead with a note to Mrs. Holloway to look out for you and Jeffreys will drive you over and come after you to-morrow noon. I believe in girls sleeping till noon after a party."

"But how are you going to the station, Aunt Rachel?" cried Nettie.

"I'll ride Nordeck. And John shall ride after me and bring the horse back. Now, scatter to do your own primping, girls, and let Mammy Dilsey 'tend to me."

In half an hour Mrs. Parsons was off—such need was there for haste. She went on horseback with a single retainer, as she said, riding at her heels. Although the weather appeared to have cleared permanently, the creeks were up and Mr. Lomaine reported the river already swollen.

Mrs. Parsons had been wise to ride horseback; a carriage might not have got safely through some of the fords she would be obliged to cross between the plantation and the railroad station.

On the other hand, the girls bound for Holloways were not likely to be held back, for there were bridges instead of fords. All in their party finery, Ruth and Helen and Nettie started away from the Big House in the roomy family carriage, and with them went Norma, Nettie's own little colored maid, with her sewing kit and extra wraps.

The road to the bridge which spanned the wide river led directly past the cotton warehouse. Ruth had not been there since her conversation with Mr. Jimson; but the warehouse boss had sent her word twice that Curly Smith seemed to be contented and desired to remain.

Both of the Northern girls were extremely anxious to see the boy from Lumberton. Ruth

looked every day, now, for a letter from Mrs. Sadoc Smith; and she hoped the stern old woman would relent and ask her grandson to return.

The river was, as Mr. Lomaine had said, very high. The brown, muddy current was littered with logs, uprooted trees, fence rails, pig-pens, hen houses, and other light litter wrenched from the banks during the last few days. Ruth said it looked quite as angry as the Lumano, at the Red Mill, when there was a flood.

Jeffreys had brought the carriage to a full stop on the bank overlooking the stream and the warehouse. The water surged almost level with the shipping platform. There had been a reason for Mr. Jimson's shifting all the cotton in storage to the upper end of the huge building. He had foreseen this rain and feared a flood.

Suddenly, just as Jeffreys was about to drive on, Helen uttered a scream, and pointed to a drifting hencoop.

"See! See that poor thing!" she cried.

"What's the matter now, honey?" asked Nettie. "I don't see anything."

"On the roof of that coop," Ruth said quickly espying what her chum saw. "The poor cat!"

"Where is there a cat?" cried Nettie, anxiously. She was a little near-sighted and could not focus her gaze upon the small object on the raft as quickly as the chums from the North.

"Dear me, Nettie!" cried Helen, in exasperation. "If you met a bear he'd have to bite you before you'd know he was there."

"Never mind," drawled the Southern girl, "I am not being chased and knocked down by deer—— Oh! I see the poor kitty."

"I should hope you did!" Helen said. "And it's going to be drowned!"

"No, no," Ruth said. "I hope not. Can't it be brought ashore? See! that coop is swinging into an eddy."

"Well, Ruthie Fielding!" cried Helen, "you're not going to jump overboard in your party dress, and try to get that poor cat, I should hope!"

"There's a boy who can get her!" exclaimed Nettie, standing up in the carriage, and being able to see well enough to espy a figure on a small raft down by the loading dock.

"Oh, Nettie! ask him to try!" gasped Ruth.

"Hey, boy!" called Nettie. "Can't you save that poor cat for us?"

The boy turned, and both Ruth and Helen recognized the curly head—if not the shockingly ragged garments—of Henry Smith. He waved a reassuring hand and pushed off from the platform.

Mr. Jimson came running from the interior of the warehouse and shouted after him.

"There! I hope we haven't got him into more trouble," mourned Ruth.

"And he can't get the cat," wailed Helen, in a moment. "The current is taking the raft clear out into midstream."

Curly was working vigorously with the single sweep, however, and he finally brought the cumbersome craft to the edge of the eddy where the hencoop with its frightened passenger whirled under the high bank.

"Yo' kyant git that cat, you fool boy!" bawled Jimson. "And yo'll lose my raft."

"Oh, Mr. Jimson!" cried Nettie. "We do want him to save that cat if he can."

"But he'll lose a mighty good oar, an' that raft," complained the boss.

"Never mind," said Nettie, firmly. "You can make another oar and another raft. But how are you going to make another cat?"

"I'll be whip-sawed!" exclaimed the long and lanky man. "Who ever heard the like of that? There's enough cats come natcher'lly without nobody's wantin' t' make none."

The girls laughed at this, but they were anxious about the cat. And, the next moment, they began to be anxious about the boy.

Curly threw away the oar and plunged right into the eddy. He had little clothing on, and no shoes, so he was not greatly trammeled in swimming to the drifting hencoop. But once there, how would he get the cat ashore?

However, the boy went about his task in quite a manful manner. He climbed up, got one arm hooked over the roof and reached for the wet and frightened cat. The poor creature was so despairing that she could not even use her claws in defense, and Curly pulled her off her perch and set her on his shoulder.

There she clung trembling, and when Curly let himself down into the water again she only uttered a wailing, "Me-e-ou!" and did not try to scratch him. He struck out for the shore, keeping his shoulders well out of the water, and after a fight of a minute or two, brought the cat to land.

Once within reach of the land, the cat leaped ashore and darted into the bushes; while Jimson helped the breathless Curly to land.

"There! yo' reckless creatuah!" exclaimed the man. "I've seen folks drown in a current no worse than that. Stan' up an' make yo' bow t' Miss Nettie, here," and he turned to Nettie, who had got out of the carriage in her interest.

Ruth and Helen stayed back. They did not wish to thrust themselves on the notice of Curly Smith. Nettie told Jimson to see that the saturated boy had a new outfit.

"And don't let him get away till Aunt Rachel returns from Charleston and sees him. She'll want to do something for him, I know," she added.

The boy glanced shyly up at the girls and suddenly caught sight of Ruth and Helen in the background. Like a shot he wheeled and ran into the bushes.

"Oh! catch him!" gasped Ruth. "Don't let him run away, Mr. Jimson."

"He's streakin' it for my shack, I reckon," said the boss. "Mis Jimson'll find him some old duds of mine to put on."

"But maybe he won't come back," said Helen, likewise anxious.

"Ya-as he will. I ain't paid him fo' his wo'k here," chuckled Jimson. "He'll stay a while longah. Don't fret about that."

Nettie got back into the carriage, which went on toward the bridge. As they crossed the long span the girls saw that the current was roaring between the piers and that much rubbish was held upstream by the bridge. The bridge shook under the blows of the logs and other debris which charged against it.

"My! this is dangerous!" cried Helen. "Suppose the bridge should give way?"

"Then we would not get home very easily," laughed Nettie.

It was not a laughing matter, however, when they came later to the shorter span that bridged the back water between the island where the hotel was situated, and the shore of the river. Here

the rough current was level with the plank flooring of the bridge, and as the carriage rattled over, the girls could feel that the planks were almost ready to float away.

"We'll be marooned on this island," said Ruth, "if the water rises much higher."

"Who cares?" laughed Nettie, to whom it was all an exciting adventure and nothing more. With all her natural timidity she did not look ahead very far.

Jeffreys and the footman were in a hurry to get back. The instant the girls and their little maid got out at the hotel steps, the coachman turned the horses and hastened away.

A little, smiling woman in a trailing gown came down the steps to welcome the party from Merredith. "I am Mrs. Holloway," she said. "I am glad to see you, girls. Jake reached here about an hour ago and said Mrs. Parsons could not come. It is to be deplored; but it need not subtract any from your pleasure on the occasion.

"Come in—do," she added. "I will show you to your rooms."

CHAPTER XVI

THE "HOP"

It was not a large hotel, and altogether it could not have housed more than fifty guests. But in the dusk, as the girls from Merredith had ridden over in the carriage, they could see that there were several attractive cottages on the island. There was a deal of life about the caravansary.

Now there was just time for Ruth Fielding and her friends to take a peep in the mirror before running down at the sound of the dinner gong to take the places Mrs. Holloway had pointed out to them in the dining room.

The other guests came trooping in from the porches and from their rooms—most of the matrons and young girls already in their party frocks, like the girls from Merredith. Mrs. Holloway found an opportunity to introduce the trio of friends to several people, while Nettie Parsons was already known to many of the matrons present.

The affair was to begin early. Indeed, the girls heard the fiddles tuning up before dinner was ended.

"Oh! hear that fiddle. Doesn't it make your feet fairly *itch?*" cried Nettie. Nettie, like most Southern girls, loved dancing.

There were some Virginia reels and some square dances, and all, old and young, joined in these. The reels were a general romp, it was true; but the fun and frolic were of the most harmless character.

The master of ceremonies called out the changes in a resonant voice and all—old and young—danced the square dance with hearty enjoyment. The girls from the North had never seen quite such a party as this; but they enjoyed it hugely. They were not allowed to be without partners for any dance; and the boys introduced to Ruth and Helen were nice and polite and—most of them—danced well.

"Learning to dance seems to be more common among Southern boys than up North," Helen said. "Even Tom says he *hates* dancing. And it's sometimes hard to get good partners at the school dances at Briarwood."

"I think we have our boys down here better trained," said Nettie, smiling.

The girls heard, as the time passed, several people expressing their wonder that certain guests from the mainland had not arrived. The dancing floor, which occupied more than half the lower floor of the hotel, was by no means crowded, al-

though every white person on the island was in attendance—either dancing or looking on.

At the back, the gallery was crowded with blacks, their shining faces thrust in at the windows to watch the white folk. In fact, the whole population of Holloway Island was at the hotel.

The last few guests who had arrived from the cottages came under umbrellas as it had begun to rain again. When the fiddles stopped they could hear the drumming of the rain on the porch roofs.

"I'm glad we aren't obliged to go home to-night," said Nettie, with a little shiver, as she stood with her friends near a porch window during an intermission. "Hear that rain pouring down!"

"And how do you suppose the bridges are?" asked Helen.

"There! I reckon that's why those folks from the other shore didn't get here," Nettie said. "I shouldn't wonder if the planks of the old bridge had floated away."

"Whoo!" Helen cried. "How are *we* going to get home?"

"By boat, maybe," laughed Ruth. "Don't worry. To-morrow is another day."

And just as she said this the hotel was jarred suddenly, throughout its every beam and girder! The fiddles had just started again. They stopped. For a moment not a sound broke the startled silence in the ballroom.

Then the building shook again. There was an unmistakable thumping at the upriver end of the building. The thumping was repeated.

"Something's broken loose!" exclaimed Helen.

"Let's see what it means!" exclaimed Ruth, and she darted out of the long window.

Her chum and Nettie followed her. But when they found themselves splashing through water which had risen over the porch flooring, almost ankle deep, Nettie squealed and ran back. Helen followed Ruth to the upper end of the porch. The oil lamps burning there revealed a sight that both amazed and terrified the girls from the North.

The river had risen over its banks. It surged about the front of the hotel, but had not surrounded it, for the land at the back was higher.

In the semi-darkness, however, the girls saw a large object looming above the porch roof, and it again struck against the hotel. It was a light cottage that had been raised from its foundation and swept by the current against the larger building.

Again it crashed into the corner of the hotel. The roof of the porch was wrecked at this corner by the heavy blow. Windows crashed and servants began to scream. Ruth clutched Helen and drew her back against the wall as the chimney-bricks of the drifting cottage fell through the broken roof of the veranda.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FLOOD RISES

THERE was a doorway near at hand—the floor of the house being one step higher than the porch which was now flooded. Ruth was just about to drag her chum into this doorway when a figure plunged out of it—a thin, graceless figure in a rain-garment of some kind—and little else, as it proved.

"Oh! oh! oh!" screamed the stranger as she spattered into the water in her slippered feet. "I am killed! I am drowned!"

Helen began actually to giggle. It did not seem so tragic to her that the hotel on the island should become suddenly surrounded by water, or be battered by drifting buildings which the flood had uprooted. The surprise and fright the woman expressed as she halted on the porch, was calculated to arouse one's laughter.

"Oh, oh, oh!" said the woman, more feebly.

"Come right back into the house—do!" cried Ruth. "You won't get wet there."

"But the house is falling down!" gasped the

woman, and as she turned the lamplight from the hall revealed her features, and Helen uttered a stifled cry.

She recognized the woman's face. So did Ruth, and amazement possessed both the girls. There was no mistaking the features of the irritable, nervous teacher from New England, Miss Miggs!

"Do come into the house, Miss Miggs," urged Ruth. "It isn't going to fall yet."

"How do you know?" snapped the school teacher, as obstinate as ever.

The cottage that had been battering the corner of the porch was now torn away by the river and swept on, down the current. There sounded a great hullabaloo from the ballroom. Although the river had not yet risen as high as the dancing floor, the frightened revelers saw that the flood was fairly upon them. At the back the darkies added their cries to the screams of the hysterical guests.

Another drifting object struck and jarred the hotel. Miss Miggs repeated her scream of fear, and darted into the hall with the same impetuosity with which she had darted out.

"Who are you girls?" she demanded, peering at Ruth and Helen closely, for she did not wear her spectacles. "Haven't I seen you before? I declare! you're the girls who stole my ticket—the idea!"

At the moment—and in time to hear this accusation—Mrs. Holloway appeared from down the hall. "Oh, Martha!" she cried. "Are you out of your bed?"

She gave the two girls from the North a sharp look as she spoke to the teacher; but this was no time for an explanation of Miss Miggs' remark. The school teacher immediately opened a volley of complaints:

"Well, I must say, Cousin Lydia, if I were you I'd build my house on some secure foundation. And calling it a hotel, too! My mercy me! the whole thing will be down like a house of cards in ten minutes, and we shall be drowned."

"Oh, no, Cousin Martha," said the Southern woman. "We shall be all right. The river will not rise much higher, and it will never tear the hotel from its base. It is too large."

"Look at these other houses floating away, Lydia Holloway!" screamed Miss Miggs.

"But they are only the huts from along shore——"

Her statement was interrupted by a terrific shock the hotel suffered as a good-sized cottage—one of the nearest of the summer colony—smashed against the hotel, rebounded, and drifted away down stream.

The two women and the two girls were flung together in a clinging group for half a minute.

Then Miss Martha Miggs tore herself away. "Let go of me, you impudent young minxes!" she cried. "Are you trying to rob me again?"

"Oh! the horrid thing!" gasped Helen; but Ruth kept her lips closed.

She knew anything they could say would make a bad matter worse. Already the hotel proprietor's wife was looking at them very doubtfully.

It had stopped raining, but the damp wind swept into the open door and chilled the girls in their thin frocks. Mrs. Holloway saw this and remembered that she had to answer to Mrs. Parsons for her guests' well being.

"Come back into this room," she commanded, and led Miss Miggs first by the arm into an unlighted parlor. The windows looked up the river, and as the quartette reached the middle of the room, the unhappy school teacher emitted another shriek and pointed out of the nearest unshaded window.

"What is the matter with you now, Martha Miggs?" demanded Mrs. Holloway, in some exasperation. "If I had known you were in such an hysterical, nervous state, I would not have invited you down here—and sent your ticket and all—I assure you. I never saw such a person for startling one."

"And lots of good the ticket did—with these girls stealing it from me," snapped Miss Miggs,

"But look at that house next to yours. There! see it heave? And there's a lighted lamp in that room."

Everybody saw the peril which the school teacher had observed. A lamp stood on the center table in the parlor of the house next. This house was set on a lower foundation than the hotel and the rising river, surging about it, had begun to loosen it.

Even as they looked, the house tipped perceptibly, and the lighted lamp fell from the table to the floor.

The burning oil was scattered about the room. Although everything was saturated with rain outside, the interior of the cottage began to burn furiously and the conflagration would soon endanger the hotel itself.

Helen broke down and began to cry. Ruth put her arm about her chum and tried to soothe her. Some of the men came charging into the room, thinking by the sudden flare of the conflagration, that this end of the hotel was already on fire.

"Oh, dear! Goodness, me!" shrieked the school teacher, taking thought of her dishabille, and she turned at once and fled upstairs. Mrs. Holloway quietly fainted in an adjacent, comfortable chair. The men went out on the porch to see if they could reach the burning cottage; but the water was too deep and too swift between the two structures.

Ruth carefully attended the woman who had fainted. What had become of Miss Miggs she did not know. Mrs. Holloway regained consciousness very suddenly. She looked up at Ruth, recognized her, and shrank away from the girl of the Red Mill.

"Don't—don't," she gasped. "I'm all right."

Mrs. Holloway's hand went to the bosom of her gown, she fumbled there a minute, and then brought forth her purse. The feel of the money in it seemed to reassure her; but Ruth knew what the gesture meant. What she had heard her cousin say had impressed the hotel keeper's wife strongly.

Hearing the school teacher accuse the two Northern girls of stealing from her, Mrs. Holloway considered herself unsafe in Ruth's hands.

"Oh, come away," urged Helen, who had likewise observed the woman's action. "These people make me ill. I wish we were back North again among our own kind."

"Hush!" warned Ruth. But in secret she felt justified in making the same wish as her chum.

CHAPTER XVIII

ACROSS THE RIVER

As the night shut down and the rain began again, the party at Holloway's had paid no attention to the rising flood. But on the other side of the river the increasing depth of the water was narrowly watched.

"It's the biggest rise she's showed since Adam was a small boy!" Mr. Jimson declared. "Looks like she'd make a clean sweep of some of these bottomland farms below yere. Mr. Lomaine's goin' t' lose cash-dollars befo' she's through kickin' up her heels—yo' take it from me!"

Mr. Jimson's audience consisted of his immediate family—a wife, lank like himself, and six white-haired, lank children, like six human steps, from the little toddler, hanging to the table-cloth and so getting his balance, to a lank girl of fifteen or thereabouts. In addition, there was Curly Smith.

Curly had been taken right into the Jimson family when he had first come along on a flatboat, the crew of which had treated him so badly that he had

left it and applied at the cotton warehouse for work. He worked every day beyond his strength, if the truth were told, and for very poor pay; but he was glad of decent housing.

The world had never used a runaway worse than it had used Curly. All the way down the river from Pee Dee—where his money had run out, and his transportation, too—the boy had been knocked about. And farther north, as Ruth Fielding and Helen knew, Curly Smith's path had not been strewn with roses.

Therefore, if for no other reason, the boy who had run away to escape arrest, would have remained with Mr. Jimson. The latter's rough good nature seemed the friendliest thing Curly had ever known; but he was scared when he recognized Ruth and Helen and knew that they were the "little Miss Yanks" of whom he had heard the cotton warehouse boss speak.

Here were two girls who knew him—knew him well when he was at home—right in the very part of Dixie in which unwise Curly Smith had taken refuge. Curly had no idea while coming down on the New Union Line boat to Norfolk, that Ruth and Helen were aboard; nor had he recognized Helen when he went to her rescue at the City Park zoo when the stag had so startled her.

In the first place, he did not know that any of the Briarwood Hall girls who had made their

home with his grandmother for a few weeks in the spring, had any intention of coming down to the Land of Cotton for a part of their summer vacation.

It was a distinct shock to Curly when he brought the half-drowned cat ashore that afternoon, to see Ruth and Helen as the guests of Nettie Parsons. He did not know that the girls recognized him; but he was quite sure they would see him if he continued to linger in the vicinity.

Therefore, Curly's mind was more taken up with plans for getting away from Mr. Jimson than it was with the boss' remarks about the rising river. Not until some time after supper one of the children ran in with the announcement that there was a "big fire acrosst the river" was the boy shaken out of his secret ponderings.

"That's got t' be the hotel, I'll be whip-sawed if 'taint!" declared Mr. Jimson, starting out into the now drizzling rain without his hat.

Curly followed, because the rest of the family showed interest; but he really did not care. What was a burning hotel to him? Then he heard Mrs. Jimson say:

"Ye don't mean that's Holloway's, Jimson?"

"That's what she be."

"And the bridge is down by this time."

"Sho's yo' bawn, Almiry. An' boats swep' away, too."

"An' like enough the water's clean up over that islan'. My land, Jimson! that'll be dretful. Them folks is all caught like rats in a trap. Treed by the river—an' the hotel afire."

"It looks like the up-river end of the hotel," said her husband.

"My land! what'll Mrs. Parsons say? If anything happens to her niece an' them other gals——"

"I'll be whip-sawed! them little Miss Yanks is right there, ain't they?"

At that, Curly Smith woke up. "Say!" he cried. "Are Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron at that hotel that's afire?"

"Huh?" demanded Jimson. "Them little Miss Yanks?"

"Yes."

"If they stuck to Miss Nettie, they are," agreed the warehouse boss. "And Jeffreys said he left 'em there, when he come back jest 'fo' supper."

"Those girls in that burning building?" repeated Curly. "Say, Mr. Jimson! you aren't going to stand here and do nothing about it, are you?"

"Wal! what d'ye reckon we kin do?" asked the man, scratching his head in a puzzled way. "There's more'n we-uns over there to rescue the ladies."

"And the river up all around them? And no boats?" demanded Curly.

"Sho'! I never thought of that," admitted the man. "Here's this old bateau yere——"

"Can you and me row it?" asked Curly, sharply.

"Great grief! No!" exclaimed Jimson. "Not in a thousand years!"

"Can't we get some of the colored men to help?"

"I reckon we could. The hotel's more'n a mile below yere on the other side and we might strike off across the river slantin' and hit the island," Jimson said slowly.

"Le's try it, then!" cried the excited boy. "I'll run stir up the negroes—shall I?"

"Better let me do that," said Jimson, with more firmness. "Almiry! gimme my hat. If we kin do anything to help 'em——"

"Oh, Paw! look at them flames!" cried one of the children.

The fire seemed to shoot up suddenly in a pillar of flame and smoke. It had burst through the upper floor of the cottage and was now writhing out the chimney; but from this side of the river it still seemed to be the hotel itself that was ablaze.

Curly had forgotten his idea of running away—for the present, at least. He remembered what a "good sport" (as he expressed it) Ruth Fielding was, and how she and her chum might be in danger across there at Holloways.

If the hotel burned, where would the people go who were in it? With the river rising momentar-

ily, and threatening every small structure along its banks with destruction, and no boats at hand, surely the situation of the people in the hotel must be serious.

Curly went down to the edge of the water and found the big bateau. There were huge sweeps for it, and four could be used to propel the craft, while a fifth was needed to steer with.

The boy got these out and arranged everything for the start. When Jimson came back with four lusty negroes—all hands from the warehouse and ginhouse—Curly was impatiently waiting for them. The fire across the river had assumed greater proportions.

"That ain't the hotel, boss," said one of the negroes, with assurance.

"What is it, then?" demanded Jimson.

"It's got t' be the cottage dishyer side ob the hotel. But, fo' goodness' sake! de hotel's gwine t' burn, too."

"And all them folkses in hit!" groaned another.

"Shut up and come on!" commanded Jimson. "We'll git acrosst and see what's what."

"If we *kin* git acrosst," grumbled another of the men. "Looks mighty spasmdous t' *me*. Dat watah's sho' high."

But Curly was casting off the mooring, and in a moment the big, clumsy boat swung out into the current.

CHAPTER XIX

"IF AUNT RACHEL WERE ONLY HERE!"

As soon as they were sure Mrs. Holloway had quite recovered from her fainting spell, Ruth Fielding and Helen wished to get as far away from the fire as possible.

There was nothing they could do, of course, to help put out the blaze. Nor did it seem possible for the men who had come from the ballroom to do anything towards extinguishing the fire. The flames were spreading madly through the interior of the cottage; but they had not as yet burst through the walls or the roof.

The cottage had not been torn from its foundation, although it had been sadly shaken. If it fell it might not endanger the hotel, for it was plain that what little cant had been given to the burning house was away from the larger building, not toward it.

Ruth and Helen had wet their feet already; but they did not care to slop through the puddle on the porch again, so made their way to the ballroom through the main part of the house. There

was less noise among the frightened women and girls now than before; but they were huddled into groups, some crying with fear of they did not know what!

"Oh! is the house tumbling down?" asked one frightened woman of Ruth. "Must we drown?"

"Not unless we want to, I am sure, madam," said the girl of the Red Mill, cheerfully.

"But isn't the house afire?" cried another.

"It isn't this house, but another, that is burning," the Northern girl said, with continued placidity.

"Oh, Ruth! there's Nettie!" exclaimed Helen, and drew her away.

In a corner was Nettie Parsons, crouched upon a stool, and the girls expected to find her in tears. But the little serving maid, Norma, had run to her and was now kneeling on the floor with her face hidden in Nettie's lap.

"The po' foolish creature," sighed Nettie, when the chums reached her, a soothing hand upon the shaking black girl's head. "She is just about out of her head, she's so scared. I tell her that the Good Lo'd won't let harm come to us; but she just can't help bein' scared."

Nettie's drawl made Helen laugh. But Ruth was proud of her. The Southern girl had forgotten to be afraid herself while she comforted her little servant.

There was nothing one could do but speak a comforting word now and then. Ruth was glad that Helen took the matter so cheerfully. For, really, as the girl of the Red Mill saw it, there was not yet any reason for being particularly worried.

"In time of peace prepare for war, however," she said to the other girls. "We *may* have to leave the hotel in a hurry. Let us go upstairs to the rooms we were to occupy, and pack our bags again, and bring them down here with us. Then if they say we must leave, we shall be ready."

"But how can we leave?" demanded Helen. "By boat?"

"Maybe. Goodness! if we only had a boat we could get back across the river and walk to the Big House."

"Oh! I wish we were there now," murmured Nettie.

"I wish you had your wish!" exclaimed Helen. "But we'll do as Ruth says. Maybe we'll get a chance to leave the place."

For Helen had been quite as much disturbed by the appearance of Miss Miggs as Ruth had been. She, too, saw that the woman's accusation had made an impression upon the mind of her cousin, Mrs. Holloway.

"I hope we get out before there is trouble over that horrid woman's ticket. Who would have

expected to meet her here?" said Helen to her chum.

"No more than we expected to meet Curly at Merredith," Ruth returned.

They went upstairs, Norma, the little maid, keeping close to them. Helen declared the negress was so scared that she was gray in the face.

They heard a group of men talking on the stairs. They were discussing the pros and cons of the situation. Nobody seemed to have any idea as to what should be done. A more helpless lot of people Ruth Fielding thought she had never seen before.

But after all, the girls from the North did not understand the situation exactly. There was nothing one could do to stop the rising flood. There were no means of transporting the people from the island to the higher land across the narrow creek. And all around the hotel, save at the back, the water was shoulder deep.

The rough current and the floating debris made venturing into the water a dangerous thing, as well. The fire next door could not be put out; so there seemed nothing to do but to wait for what might happen.

This policy of waiting for what might turn up did not suit Ruth Fielding, of course. But there was nothing she could do just then to change matters for the better. The suggestion she had made

about packing the bags was more to give her friends something to do, and so take their minds off the peril they were in, than aught else.

There were other people on the second floor, and as the girls went into their rooms they heard somebody talking loudly at the other end of the hall. At the moment they paid no attention to this excited female voice.

Ruth set the example of immediately returning her few possessions to her bag and preparing to leave the room at once. Her chum was ready almost as soon; but they had to help Nettie and the maid. The former did not know what to do, and the frightened Norma was perfectly useless.

"I declare! I won't take this useless child with me anywhere again," said Nettie. "Goodness me!" she continued, pettishly, to the shaking maid, "have you stolen the silver spoons that your conscience troubles you so?"

But nothing could make Norma look upon the situation less seriously. When the girls came out of the door into the hall, bags in hand, Ruth was first. Immediately the high, querulous voice broke upon their ears again, and now the girls from the North recognized it.

"There! they've been in one of your rooms!" cried the sharp voice of Miss Miggs. "You'd better go and search 'em and see what they've stolen now."

"Hush, Martha!" exclaimed Mrs. Holloway.

Ruth turned with flaming cheeks and angry eyes. Her temper at last had got the better of her discretion.

"I believe you are the meanest woman whom I ever saw!" she exclaimed, much to Helen's delight. "Don't you *dare* say Helen and I touched your railroad ticket. I—I wish there were some means of punishing you for accusing us the way you do. I don't blame your scholars for treating you meanly—if they did. I don't see how you could expect them to do otherwise. Nobody could love such a person as you are, I do believe."

"Three rousing cheers!" gasped Helen under her breath, while Nettie Parsons looked on in open-mouthed amazement.

"There! you hear how the minx dares talk to me," cried Miss Miggs, appealing to the ladies about her.

Besides Mrs. Holloway, there were three or four others. Miss Miggs was dressed now and looked more presentable than she had when endeavoring to escape from the hotel in her raincoat and slippers.

"I—I don't understand it at all," confessed the hotel proprietor's wife. "Surely, my cousin would not accuse these girls without some reason. She is from the North, too, and must understand them better than *we* do."

No comment could have been more disastrous to the peace of mind of Ruth and Helen. The latter uttered a cry of anger and Ruth could scarcely keep back the tears.

"Perhaps we had better look out for our possessions," said one of the other ladies, doubtfully.

"Yes. They *did* just come out of one of these rooms," said another.

"Oh! these are the rooms they were to occupy," cried Mrs. Holloway, all in a flutter. "I—I do not think they would do anything——"

"Say!" gasped Nettie, at last finding voice. "I want to know what yo'-all mean? Yo' can't be speaking of my friends?"

"Who is *this* girl, I'd like to know!" exclaimed Miss Miggs. "One just like them, no doubt."

"Oh, Martha! Mrs. Parsons' niece," gasped Mrs. Holloway. "Mrs. Parsons will never forgive me."

"Gracious heavens!" gasped one of the other women. "Yon don't mean to say that these are the girls from Merredith?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Holloway. "Of course, nobody believes that Miss Parsons would do any such thing; but these other girls are probably merely school acquaintances——"

"I should like to know," said Nettie, with sudden firmness, "just what you mean—all of you? What have Ruth and Helen done?"

"They stole my railroad ticket on the boat coming down from New York," declared Miss Martha Miggs.

"That is not so!" said Nettie, quickly. "Under no circumstances would I believe it. It is impossible."

"Do you say that my cousin does not tell the truth?" asked Mrs. Holloway, stiffly, while Miss Miggs herself could only stammer angry words.

"Absolutely," declared Nettie, her naturally pale cheeks glowing. "I am amazed at you, Mrs. Holloway. I know Aunt Rachel will be offended."

"But my own cousin tells me so, and——"

"I do not care who tells you such a ridiculous story," Nettie interrupted, and Ruth and Helen were surprised to see how dignified and assertive their usually timid friend could be when she was really aroused.

"Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron are above such things. They are, besides, guests at Merredith, and we were put in your care, Mrs. Holloway, and when you insult them you insult my aunt. Oh! if Aunt Rachel were only here, she could talk to you," concluded Nettie, shaking all over she was so angry. *"And she would, too!"*

CHAPTER XX

CURLY PLAYS AN HEROIC PART

MRS. RACHEL PARSONS' name was one "to conjure with," as the saying goes. Ruth and Helen had marked that fact before. Not alone in the vicinity of Merredith plantation, but in the cities and towns through which the visitors had come in reaching the cotton farm, they had observed how impressive her name seemed.

Several of the ladies who had been listening avidly to Miss Miggs' declaration that she had been robbed, now hastened to disclaim any intention of offending Mrs. Parsons' niece and her friends.

But the angry Nettie was not so easily pacified. She was actually in tears, it was true, but, as Helen said, "as brave as a little lioness!" In the cause of her school friends she could well hold her own with these scandal-mongers.

"I am surprised that anybody knowing my aunt should believe for a moment such a ridiculous tale as this woman utters," Nettie said, flashing an indignant glance about the group.

"It is self-evident that if Aunt Rachel invites anybody to her home, that the person's character is above reproach. That is all *I* can say. But I know very well that she will say something far more serious when she hears of this.

"Come, Ruthie and Helen. Let us go downstairs. I am sorry I cannot take you immediately home. But be sure that, once we are away from Holloway's, we shall never come here again."

"Oh, Miss Nettie!" gasped the hotel keeper's wife. "I did not mean——"

"You will have to discuss that point with Aunt Rachel," said Nettie, firmly, yet still wiping her eyes. "I only know that I will take Ruthie and Helen nowhere again to be insulted. As for that woman," she flashed, as a Parthian shot at Miss Miggs, "I think she must be crazy!"

The girls descended the stairs. At the foot Nettie put her arms about Ruth's neck and then about Helen's, and kissed them both. She was not naturally given to such displays of affection; but she was greatly moved.

"Oh, my dears!" she cried. "I would not have had this happen for anything! It is terrible that you should be so insulted—and among our own people. Aunt Rachel will be perfectly wild!"

"Don't tell her, then," urged Ruth, quickly. "That woman will not be allowed to say anything more, it is likely; so let it blow over."

"It cannot blow over. Not only did she insult you, and her cousin allowed her to do so, but their attitude insulted Aunt Rachel. Why! there is not a person in this hotel the equal of Aunt Rachel. The Merrediths are the best known family in the whole county. How Mrs. Holloway *dared*——"

"There, there!" said Ruth, soothingly. "Let it go. Neither Helen nor I are killed."

"But your reputations might well be," Nettie said quickly.

"Nobody knows us much here——"

"But they know Aunt Rachel. And I assure you they will hear about this matter in a way they won't like. The Holloways especially. She'd better send that crazy woman packing back to the North."

At that moment a shout arose from the front veranda. The girls, followed by Norma screaming in renewed fright, ran to the door. The water was still over the flooring of the veranda, but it had not advanced into the house.

The group of excited men on the porch were pointing off into the river. Out there it was very dark; but there was a light moving on the face of the troubled waters.

"A boat is coming!" explained somebody to the girls. "That's a lantern in it. A boat from across the river."

"A steamboat?" cried Helen.

"Oh, no; a steamboat would not venture to-night—if at all. And there is none near by. It's a bateau of some kind."

"Bet it's the old bateau from the cotton warehouse across there," said another of the men. "Jimson is trying to reach us."

"And what can he do when he gets here?" asked a third. "That burning house is bound to fall this way. Then we'll have to fight fire for sure!"

"Well, Holloway has a bucket brigade all ready," said the first speaker. "With all this water around, it's too bad if we can't put a fire out."

The fire was illuminating all the vicinity now, for the flames had burst through the roof. The whole of one end of the cottage was in a blaze, and the wall of the hotel nearest to it was blistering in the heat.

The hotel proprietor stood there with his helpers watching the blaze. But the girls watched the approaching boat, its situation revealed by the bobbing lantern.

"If that *is* Mr. Jimson," said Helen, "I hope he can take us back across the river."

"And he shall if it's safe," Nettie said, with confidence. "But my! the water's rough."

"Oh, Miss Nettie! Miss Nettie!" groaned Norma. "Yo' ain' gwine t' vencha on dat awful ribber, is yo'?"

"Why not, you ridiculous creature?" demanded her mistress. "If you are afraid to stay here, and afraid to go in the boat, what *will* you do?"

"Wait till it dries up!" wailed the darkey maid. "Den we kin walk home, dry-shod—ya-as'm!"

"Wait for the river to dry up, and all?" chuckled Helen.

"That's what she wants," said Nettie. "I never saw such a foolish girl."

The bobbing lantern came nearer. Just as it reached the edge of the submerged island, there arose a shout from the men aboard of her. Then sounded a mighty crash.

"Hol' on, boys! hol' on!" arose the voice of Mr. Jimson. "Don't lose yo' grip! *Pull!*"

But the negroes could not pull the water-logged boat. She had struck a snag which ripped a hole in her bottom, and had been rammed by a log at the same time. The bateau was a wreck in a few seconds.

The six members of the crew, including the boss and Curly Smith, leaped overboard as the bateau sank. They had brought the boat so far, after a terrific fight with the current, only to sink her not twenty yards from the front steps of the hotel!

"Throw us a line—or a life-buoy!" yelled Jimson. "This yere river is tearin' at us like a pack o' wolves. Ain't yo' folks up there got no heart?"

One of the negroes uttered a wild yell and went

whirling away down stream, clinging to a timber that floated by. Two others managed to climb into the low branches of a tree.

But Jimson, the fourth negro, and Curly Smith struck out for the hotel. After all, Curly was the best swimmer. Jimson would have been carried past the end of the hotel and down the current, had not the Northern boy caught him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him to the steps.

There he left the panting boss and plunged in again to bring the negro to the surface. This fellow could not swim much, and was badly frightened. The instant he felt Curly grab him, he turned to wind his arms about the boy.

The lights burning on the hotel porch showed all this to the girls. Ruth and Helen, already wet half-way to their knees, had ventured out on the porch again in their excitement. Ruth screamed when she saw the danger Curly was in.

The boy had helped save Mr. Jimson; but the negro and he were being swept right past the hotel porch. They must both sink and be drowned if somebody did not help them—and no man was at hand.

"Take my hand, Helen!" commanded Ruth. "Maybe I can reach them. Scream for help—do!" and she leaned out from the end of the veranda, while her chum clung tightly to her left wrist.

The boy and the negro came near. The water eddied about the porch-end and held them in its grasp for a moment.

It was then that Ruth stooped lower and secured a grip upon the black man's sleeve. She held on grimly while her chum shrieked for help. Jimson came staggering along to their aid.

"Hold on t' him, Miss Ruth!" he cried. "We'll git him!"

But if it had depended upon the spent warehouse boss to rescue the boy and his burden, they would never have been saved. Two of the men at the other end of the porch finally heard Helen and Nettie and came to help.

"Haul that negro in," said one, laughing. "Is he worth saving, Jimson?"

"I 'spect so," gasped the boss of the cotton warehouse. "But I know well that that white boy is. My old woman sho' wouldn't ha' seen *me* ag'in if it hadn't been fo' Curly. I was jes' about all in."

So was Curly, as the girls could see. When the boy was dragged out upon the porch floor, and lay on his back in the shallow water, he could neither move nor speak. The men tried to raise him to his feet, but his left leg doubled under him.

It was Ruth who discovered what was the matter. "Bring him inside. Lay him on a couch. Don't you see that the poor boy has broken his leg?" she demanded.

CHAPTER XXI

THE NEXT MORNING

THE fire was now at its height, and many of the men were fighting the flames as they leaped across from the burning cottage. Therefore, not many had been called to the help of the refugees from the wrecked bateau.

"I'll be whip-sawed!" complained Jimson. "Foolin' with their blamed old bonfire, they might ha' let me an' my negroes drown. This yere little Yankee boy is wuth the whole bilin' of 'em."

They carried Curly, who was quite unconscious now, into the house. On a couch in the office Ruth fixed a pillow, and straightened out his injured leg.

"Isn't there a doctor? Somebody who knows something about setting the leg?" she demanded. "If it can only be set now, while he is unconscious, he will be saved just so much extra pain."

"Let me find somebody!" cried Nettie, who knew almost everybody in the hotel party.

She ran out upon the veranda, forgetting her slippers and silk hose for the moment, and soon

came back with one of the men who had been helping to throw water against the side of the building.

"This is Dr. Coombs. I know he can help you, Ruth—and he will."

"Boy with broken leg, heh?" said the gentleman, briefly. "Is that all the damage?" and he began to examine the unconscious Curly. "Now, you're a cool-headed young lady," he said to Ruth; "you and Jimson can give me a hand. Send the others out of the room. We're going to be mighty busy here for a few minutes."

He saw that Ruth was calm and quick. He had her get water and bandages. Mr. Jimson whittled out splints as directed. The doctor was really a veterinary surgeon, but when the setting of the broken limb was accomplished, Curly might have thanked Dr. Coombs for a very neat and workmanlike piece of work. But poor Curly remained unconscious for some time thereafter.

The flames were under control and the danger of the hotel's catching fire was past before the boy opened his eyes. He opened them to see Ruth sitting at the foot of the couch on which he lay.

"Old Scratch!" exclaimed Curly, "don't tell Gran, Ruth Fielding. If you do, she'll give me what-ever for busting my leg. Ooo! don't it hurt."

He had forgotten for the moment that he had ever left Lumberton, and Ruth soothed him as best she could.

The bustle and confusion around the hotel had somewhat subsided. The regular guests had retired to their rooms, for it was past midnight now. The water was creeping higher and higher, and now began to run in over the floor of the lower story.

By Ruth's advice, Helen and Nettie had gone up to their rooms. They had allowed Mrs. Holloway to put two young ladies in one of the beds there, for the hotel keeper had to house many more than the usual number of people.

Ruth alone stayed with Mr. Jimson to watch Curly. And when the water began to rise she insisted that the couch be lifted upon the shoulders of four powerful negroes, and carried upstairs.

One of the men who transferred the boy to the wide hall above, was the darkey whom Curly had saved from drowning. That negro was so grateful that he camped upon the stairs for the rest of the night, to be within call of Ruth or Mr. Jimson if anything was needed that he could do for "dat li'le w'ite boy."

Mrs. Holloway found a screen to put at the foot of the couch, and thus made a shelter for the boy and his nurse. But Ruth knew that many of the ladies before they went to bed came and peeped at her, and whispered about her together in the open hall.

She wondered what they really thought of her

and Helen. The positive Miss Miggs had undoubtedly made an impression on their minds when she accused Ruth and Helen of stealing.

"What they really think of us, we can't tell," Ruth told herself. "It is awful to be so far from home and friends, and have no way of proving that one is of good character. Here is poor Curly. What is going to become of him? His grandmother hasn't answered my letters, and perhaps she won't have anything to do with him after all. What will become of him while he lies helpless? He can't have earned much money in these few days over at the warehouse, for they don't pay much."

Ruth Fielding's sympathetic nature often caused her to bear burdens that were imaginary—to a degree. But it was not her own trouble that worried her now. It was that of the boy with the broken leg.

He was a stranger in a strange land, and with practically nobody to care how he got along. He had played a heroic part in the rescue of Mr. Jimson and the negro workman; but Ruth doubted greatly if either of the rescued men could do much for poor Curly.

Jimson was a poor man with a large family; the negro was, of course, less able to do anything for the white boy than the boss of the warehouse.

These thoughts troubled Ruth's mind, sleeping

and waking, all night. She refused to leave Curly; but she dozed a good deal of the time in the comfortable chair that the negro had brought her from the parlor downstairs.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Holloway came to speak to her, or to see how Curly was, all night long. Yet Ruth knew that both were working hard, with the negroes in their employ, to make all their guests comfortable.

Back of the hotel on slightly higher ground were the kitchens and quarters. To these rooms the stores were removed and breakfast was begun for all before six o'clock.

By that time the clouds had broken and the sun shone. But the river roared past the hotel at express speed. Jimson said he had never seen it so high, or so furious.

"There's a big reservoir above yere, up the creek; I reckon it's done busted its banks, or has overflowed, or something," the boss of the warehouse said. "Never was so much water in this yere river at one time since Adam was a boy, I tell yo'."

The girls came for Ruth before breakfast, and made her lie down for a nap. The two strange girls who had been put in their rooms were still in bed, and Ruth was not disturbed until the negroes began coming upstairs with trays of breakfast for the different rooms.

There was great hilarity then. There was no use in trying to serve the guests downstairs, for the dining room had a foot of water washing through one end of it, and the rear was several inches deep in a muddy overflow.

The two girls who had slept with them awoke when Ruth did, and all five of the girls, with Norma to wait upon them, made a merry breakfast. Ruth ran back then to see how Curly was being served. She found the boy alone, and nobody had thought to bring him any food save the grateful negro laborer.

"That coon's all right," said Curly, with satisfaction. "He got me half a fried chicken and some corn pone and sweet potatoes, and I'm feeling fine. All but my leg. Old Scratch! but that hurts like a good feller, Ruth Fielding."

"Dear me!" said Ruth. "Don't speak of the poor man as a 'coon.' That's an animal with four legs—and they eat them down here."

"And he wouldn't be good eating, I know," chuckled Curly. "But he's a good feller. Say, Ruthie! how did you and Helen Cameron come 'way down here?"

"How did *you* come here?" returned Ruth, smiling at him.

"Why—on the boat and on a train—several trains, until I got to Pee Dee. And then a flatboat. Old Scratch! but I've had an awful time, Ruth."

"You ran away, of course," said the girl, just as though she knew nothing about the trouble Curly had had in Lumberton.

"Yep. I did. So would you."

"Why would I?"

"'Cause of what they said about me. Why, Ruth Fielding!" and he started to sit up in bed, but lay down quickly with a groan. "Oh! how that leg aches."

"Keep still then, Curly," she said. "And tell me the truth. *Why* did you run away?"

"Because they said I helped rob the railroad station."

"But if you didn't do it, couldn't you risk being exonerated in court?"

"Say! they never called you, 'that Smith boy'; did they?"

"Of course not," admitted Ruth.

"Then you don't know what you're talking about. I had no more chance of being exonerated in any court around Lumberton than I had of flying to the moon! Everybody was down on me—including Gran."

"Well, hadn't they some reason?" asked Ruth, gravely.

"Mebbe they had. Mebbe they had," cried Henry Smith. "But they ought to've known I wouldn't *steal*."

"You didn't help those tramps, then?"

"There you go!" sniffed the boy. "You're just as bad as the rest of 'em."

"I'm asking you for information," said Ruth, coolly. "I want to hear you say whether you did or not. I read about it in the paper."

"Old Scratch! did they have it in the paper?" queried Curly, with wonder.

"Yes. And your grandmother is dreadfully disgraced——"

"No she isn't," snapped Curly. "She only thinks she is. I never done it."

"Well," said Ruth, with a sigh, "I'm glad to hear you say that, although it's very bad grammar."

"Hang grammar!" cried the excited Curly. "I never stole a cent's worth in my life. And they all know it. But if they'd got me up before Judge Necker I'd got a hundred years in jail, I guess. He hates me."

"Why?"

Curly looked away. "Well, I played a trick on him. More'n one, I guess. He gets so mad, it's fun."

"Your idea of fun has brought you to a pretty hard bed, I guess, Curly," was Ruth Fielding's comment.

CHAPTER XXII

SOMETHING FOR CURLY

HELEN CAMERON was very proud of Curly. She was, in the first place, deeply grateful for what the boy had done for her the time the stag frightened her so badly in the City Park at Norfolk. Then, it seemed to her, that he had shown a deal of pluck in getting so far from home as this Southern land, and keeping clear of the police, as well.

"You must admit, Ruth, that he is awfully smart," she repeated again and again to her chum.

"I don't see it—much," returned Ruth Fielding. "I don't see how he got away down here on the little money he says he had at the start. He bought the frock and hat and shoes he wore with his own money, and paid his fare on the boat. But that took all he had, and he had to get work in Norfolk. He worked a week for a contractor there. That's when he saved you from the *deer*, my *dear!*"

"Oh, indeed? And didn't he earn enough to pay his way down here? He says he rode in the cars."

"I'll ask him about that," said Ruth, musingly.

But she forgot to do so just then. In fact there was another problem in both the girls' minds: What would become of Curly when the water subsided and he would have to be taken away from the hotel?

"Nettie says there is a hospital in Georgetown. But it is a private institution. Curly will be laid up a long while with that leg. It is a compound fracture and it will have to be kept in splints for weeks. The doctor says it ought to be in a cast. I wish he were in the hospital."

"I suppose he would be better off," said Helen, in agreement. "But isn't it awful that his grandmother won't take him back?"

"I don't understand it at all," sighed Ruth. "I didn't think she was really so hard-hearted."

The marooned guests of the hotel and the servants were quite comfortable in their quarters; but the women and girls did not care to descend to the lower floor of the big house. The men waded around the porches; and two men who owned cottages on the island which had not been swept away by the flood, used a storm-door for a raft and paddled themselves over to inspect their property. Their families were much better off with the Holloways at the hotel, however.

There had been landings and boats along the shore of the island; but not a craft was now left.

The river had risen so swiftly the evening before, while the dancing was in full blast, that there had been no opportunity to save any such property.

Every small structure on the island had been swept down the current; and only half a dozen of the cottages were left standing. These structures, too, might go at any time, it was prophesied.

Jimson and his negroes could not get back across the river, and not a craft of any description came in sight.

The two negroes who had climbed into the tree at the edge of the island, were rescued by the aid of the storm-door raft; and as Jimson said, in his rough way, they only added to the number of mouths to feed, for they were of no aid in any way.

The hotel keeper chanced to have a good supply of flour, meal, sugar and the other staples on hand; and they had been removed to dry storage before the flood reached its height. There was likewise a well supplied meat-house behind the hotel.

Naturally the ladies and girls, marooned on the upper floor of the hotel, were bound to become more closely associated as the hours of waiting passed. The two girls who roomed with Nettie and her party, learned that Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron were very nice girls indeed. They did not have to take Nettie's word for it.

Perhaps they influenced public opinion in favor of the Northern girls as much as anything did. Miss Miggs was Northern herself, and not much liked. Her spitefulness did not compare well with Ruth's practical kindness to the boy with the broken leg.

Before night public opinion had really turned in favor of the visitors from the North. But Ruth and Helen kept very much to themselves, and Nettie was so angry with Mrs. Holloway that she would scarcely speak to that repentant woman.

"I don't want anything to do with her," she said to Ruth. "If Aunt Rachel had been here last night I don't know what she would have done when that woman seemed to side with that crazy school teacher."

"You could scarcely blame her. Miss Miggs is Mrs. Holloway's cousin."

"Of course I can blame her," cried Nettie. "And I do."

"Well, I think it was pretty mean, myself," said Helen. "But I didn't suppose you would hold rancor so long, Nettie Sobersides! Come on! cheer up; the worst is yet to come."

"The worst will certainly come to these people at this hotel," threatened the Southern girl. "Aunt Rachel will have the last word. You are her guests and a Merredith or a Parsons never forgives an insult to a guest."

"Goodness!" cried Ruth, trying to laugh away Nettie's resentment. "It is fortunate you are not a man, Nettie. You would, I suppose, challenge somebody to a duel over this."

"There have been duels for less in this county, I can assure you," said Nettie, without smiling.

"How bloodthirsty!" laughed Ruth. "But let's think about something pleasanter. Nettie is becoming savage."

"I know what will cure her," cried Helen and bounced out of the room. She came back in a few minutes with a battered violin that she had borrowed from one of the negroes who had been a member of the orchestra the night before. It was a mellow instrument and Helen quickly had it in tune.

"Music has been known to soothe the savage breast," declared Helen, tucking the violin, swathed in a silk handkerchief, under her dimpled chin.

"I'll forgive anybody—even my worst enemy—if Ruth will sing, too," begged Nettie.

So after a few introductory strains Helen began an old ballad that she and Ruth had often practised together. Ruth, sitting with her hands folded in her lap and looking thoughtfully out on the drenched landscape, began to sing.

Nettie set the door ajar. The two girls came in from the other room. Norma, wide-eyed,

crouched on the floor to listen. And before long a crowd of faces appeared at the open door.

Quite unconscious of the interest they were creating, the two members of the Briarwood Glee Club played and sang for several minutes. It was Helen who looked toward the door first and saw their audience.

"Oh, Ruth!" she exclaimed, and stopped playing. Ruth turned, the song dying on her lips. The crowd of guests began to applaud and in the distance could be heard Curly Smith clapping his hands together and shouting:

"Bully for Ruth! Bully for Helen! That's fine."

"Shut the door, Nettie!" cried Helen, insistently. "I—I really have an idea."

"The concert is over, ladies," declared the Southern girl, laughing, and shutting the door.

"What's the idea, dear?" asked Ruth.

"About raising money for poor Curly."

"We can give him some ourselves," Nettie said, for of course she had been taken into the full confidence of the chums about the runaway.

"*I* can't," confessed Helen. "I have scarcely any left. If my fare home were not paid I'd have to borrow."

"I can give some; but not enough," said Ruth.

"That's where my idea comes in," Helen said. "That's why I said to shut the door."

Nettie ejaculated: "Goodness! what does the child mean?"

But Ruth guessed, and her face broke into a smile. "I'm with you, dear!" she cried. "Of course we will—if we're let."

"Will *what?*" gasped Nettie. "You girls are thought readers. What one thinks of the other knows right away."

"A concert," said Ruth and Helen together.

"Oh! When?"

"Right here—and now!" said Helen, promptly. "If the Holloways will let us."

"Oh, girls! what a very splendid idea," declared Nettie. Then the next moment she added: "But the piano is downstairs, and they could never get it up here. And there's no room big enough upstairs, anyhow."

Ruth began to laugh. "I tell you. It shall be a regular chamber concert. We'll have it in the bed chambers, for a fact!"

"What do you mean?" asked the puzzled Nettie.

"Why, the audience can sit in their rooms or on the stairs or in the long hall up here. We will give the concert downstairs. I don't know but we'll have to give it barefooted, girls!"

The laughter that followed was interrupted by a shout from below. They heard somebody say that there was a boat coming.

"Well, maybe there will be something for Curly after all," Helen cried, as she followed Ruth out of the room.

Through the wide doorway they could see the boat approaching. And they could hear it, too, for it was a small launch chugging swiftly up to the submerged island.

"Oh, goody!" cried Nettie. "Maybe we can get across the river and back to Merredith."

It looked as though the launch had just come from the other side of the swollen stream. Jimson and several of the negroes were on the porch to meet the launch as it touched.

There were but two men in it, one at the wheel and the other in the bow. The latter, a gray-haired man with a broad-brimmed hat, blue clothes, and a silver star on his breast, stepped out upon the porch in his high boots.

"Hullo, Jimson," he said, greeting the warehouse boss. "Just a little wet here, ain't yo'?"

"A little, Sheriff," said Jimson.

"I'm after a party they told me at your house was probably over here. A boy from the No'th. Name's Henry Smith. Is he yere? I was told to get him and notify folks up No'th that the little scamp's cotched. He's been stealin' up there, and they want him."

CHAPTER XXIII

"HERE'S A STATE OF THINGS!"

THE words of the deputy sheriff came clearly to the ears of Ruth Fielding and her two girl friends as they stood on the lower step of the broad flight leading to the second floor of the hotel.

Jimson, the warehouse boss, who had already shown his interest in Curly, looked quickly around and spied the girls. He made a crooked face and began at once to fence with the deputy.

"What's that?" he said. "Said I got an escaped prisoner? *Who* said that, Mr. Ricketts?"

"Yo' wife, I reckon 'twas, tol' me the boy was yere."

"She's crazy!" declared Jimson with apparent anger. "I dunno what's got into that woman. I ain't seen no convict——"

"Who's talkin' about a convict, Jimson?" demanded Mr. Ricketts. "D' yo' think I'm after some desperado from the swamps? I reckon not."

"Well, who *are* you after?" demanded the boss, in great apparent vexation. "I ain't got him, whoever he is!"

"Not a boy named Henry Smith?"

"What's he done?"

"I see you're some int'rested," said Ricketts, drily. "Come on now, Jimson! I know you. The boy's a bad lot."

"Your say-so don't make him so. And I dunno as I know the boy you mean."

"Come now, your wife tol' me all about him. He's a curly-headed boy. He come along on a flatboat. You took him on as a hand in the warehouse."

"Huh? I did, did I?" grunted Jimson, not at all willing to give in that he knew whom the deputy sheriff was talking about.

"I mean a curly-headed Yankee boy that come over yere last night in that old boat of yours, Jimson," said the deputy sheriff, chuckling. "And your woman wants to know when you're going to bring the boat back?"

"Huh?" growled Jimson.

"Don't yo' call him Curly?"

"Oh! you mean *him?*" said the boss. "Wal—I reckon he's yere. Got a broken laig. Doctor won't let him be moved. Impossible, Mr. Ricketts. Impossible!"

"I reckon I'll look to suit myself, Jimson," said Ricketts, firmly. "This ain't no funnin', you know." Then he turned to the man in the boat. "Tie that rope to one o' these posts, Tom, and

come ashore. I may need you to hold Jimson," and he winked and chuckled at the chagrined warehouse boss.

The big deputy sheriff strode across the porch, in at the door, scattering the wide-eyed negroes right and left, and came face to face with three pretty young girls, dressed in the party frocks donned for the ball the night before, all the frocks they had to wear on this occasion.

"Bless my soul, ladies!" gasped the confused Ricketts, sweeping off his hat. "Your servant!"

"Oh, Mr. Ricketts!" exclaimed Nettie Parsons, her hands clasped, and looking in her most appealing way up into the big man's face. Although Nettie stood a step up from the hall floor, the deputy sheriff still towered above her head and shoulders. "Oh, Mr. Ricketts!"

"Ya-as, ma'am! that's my name, ma'am," said the embarrassed deputy.

"We heard what you just said," pursued Nettie. "About Curly Smith, you know."

"I—I——"

"And we're awfully interested in Curly," put in Helen, joining in the attempt to cajole a perfectly helpless officer of the law from the path of duty.

"Your servant, ma'am!" gasped the deputy, very red in the face now, and bowing low before Helen.

"There are three of us, Mr. Ricketts," sug-

gested Ruth, her own eyes dancing with fun, despite the really serious distress she felt over Curly's case.

"Bless my soul!" murmured Mr. Ricketts, bowing in her direction, too. "So there are—so there are. *Your* servant, ma'am."

"Then, Mr. Ricketts, if you are the servant of *all* of us, I know you will do what we ask," and Nettie laughed merrily.

Little drops of perspiration were exuding upon the deputy's broad, bald brow. He was not used to the society of ladies—not even extremely young ladies; and he felt both ridiculous and in a glow of delight. He chuckled and wabbled his head above his stiff collar, and looked foolish. But there was a grim firmness to his smoothly shaven chin that led Ruth to believe that he would not be an easy person to swerve from his path.

"You know," repeated Nettie, taking her cue from Helen, "that we are awfully interested in that boy that you say you have come after."

"The young scamp's mighty lucky, then—mighty lucky!"

"But he has a broken leg—and he's awfully sick," said Nettie, her lips drooping at the corners as though she were about to cry.

"Tut, tut, tut! I'm awfully sorry miss. But——"

"And he's had an awfully bad time," broke in

Helen. "Curly has. He's ragged, and he has been ill-treated. And we saw him jump overboard and swim from that steamer before it reached Old Point Comfort, and he was picked up by a fishing boat. Oh! he is awfully brave."

Mr. Ricketts stared and swallowed hard. He could not find voice to reply just then.

"And he saved that cat from drowning. Oh! I had forgotten that," said Nettie, chiming in. "He really is very kind-hearted, as well as brave."

"And," said Ruth, from the stair above, "I am sure he never helped those men rob the Lumberton railroad station. Never!"

"My soul and body, ladies!" exclaimed the deputy sheriff. "You are sho' more knowin' about this yere boy from the No'th than *I* am. I only got instructions to *git* him—and git him I must."

"Oh, Mr. Ricketts!" gasped Helen.

"Please, Mr. Ricketts!" begged Nettie.

"Do consider, Mr. Ricketts!" joined in Ruth. "He's really not guilty."

"Who says he ain't?" demanded the deputy sheriff, shooting in the question suddenly.

"He says so," said Ruth, firmly, "and I never knew Curly Smith to tell a story."

Mr. Ricketts was undoubtedly in a very embarrassing position. He was the soul of gallantry—according to his standards. To please the ladies was almost the highest law of his nature.

Behind him, Jimson, his companion, Tom, and the negroes had gathered in a compact crowd to listen. Mr. Ricketts, hat in hand, and perspiring now profusely, did not know what to do. He said, feebly:

"My soul and body, ladies! I dunno what t' say. I'd please yo' if I could. But I'm instructed t' bring this yere boy in, an' I got t' do it. A broken laig ain't no killin' matter. I've had one myself—ya-as, ma'am! We kin take him in this yere little launch that b'longs t' Kunnel Peters. He'll be 'tended to fust-class."

"Not in your old jail at Pegburg!" cried Nettie. "You know better, Mr. Ricketts," and she was quite severe.

"I know you, Miss Nettie," Mr. Ricketts said, with humility. "You're Mrs. Parsons' niece. You say the wo'd an' I'll take the boy right to my own house."

Ruth had been watching one of the negroes who had stood on the outskirts of the group. He was a big, burly, dull-looking fellow—the very man whom Curly had risked his life to save from the river the night before.

This man stepped softly away from the crowd. He disappeared toward the front of the porch. By craning her neck a little Ruth could see around the corner of the door-jamb and follow the movements of this negro with her eyes.

The man, Tom, had tied the painter of the launch to a post there. The negro stood for a moment near that post; then he disappeared altogether.

Ruth's heart suddenly beat faster. What had the negro done? She leaned forward farther to see the launch tugging at its rope. *The craft was already a dozen yards away from the hotel!*

"I'm awful sorry, ladies," declared the deputy sheriff, obstinately shaking his head. "I've got t' arrest that boy. That's my sworn and bounden duty. And I got t' take him away in this yere launch of Kunnel Peterses."

He turned to wave a ham-like hand toward the tethered launch. The gesture was stayed in mid-air. Jimson, turning likewise, burst into a high cackle of laughter.

"Here's a state of things!" roared the deputy, and rushed out upon the porch. The launch was whirling away down the current, far out of reach. "Here, Tom! didn't you hitch that boat?"

"I reckon ye won't git away with that there little Yankee boy as you expected, Mr. Ricketts," cried Jimson. "Er-haw! haw! haw!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CHAMBER CONCERT

"You kin say what you like," Mr. Jimson said later, and in a hoarse aside to Ruth Fielding, "the sheriff's a good old sport. He took it laffin'—after the fust s'prise. You make much of him, Miss Ruth—you and Miss Helen and Miss Nettie —an' yo'll keep him eatin' out o' your hand, he's that gentled."

Ruth was afraid at first that somebody would suspect the negro of unleashing the launch. She did not think Mr. Jimson knew who did it. In the first heat, Mr. Ricketts accused his man, Tom, of being careless.

But it all simmered down in a few minutes. Mr. Holloway came out and invited the deputy and his comrade to come back to the rear apartment for a bite of lunch.

Mr. Ricketts seemed satisfied to know that the boy was upstairs and in good hands. He did not —at that time—ask to see him; and Ruth wanted, if she could, to keep news of the deputy's arrival from the knowledge of the patient.

"Oh, dear me, Ruth!" groaned Helen. "It never rains but it pours."

"That seems very true of the weather in this part of the world," agreed her chum. "I never saw it rain harder than it has during the past few days."

"Goodness! I don't mean real rain," said Helen. "I mean troubles never come singly."

"What's troubling you particularly now?" asked Ruth.

"I've lost my last handkerchief," said Helen, tragically. "Isn't it just awful to be here another night without a single change of anything? I feel just as mussy as I can feel. And this pretty dress will never be fit to wear again."

"We're better off than some of the girls," laughed Ruth. "One of those that room with us danced right through her stockings, heel and toe, the evening of the hop; and now every time she steps there is a great gap at each heel above her low pumps. With that costume she wears she can put on nothing but black stockings, and I saw her just now trying to ink her heels so that when anybody follows her upstairs, they will not be so likely to notice the holes in her stockings."

"Well! if that were all that bothered us!" groaned Helen. "What are we going to do about Curly?"

"What *can* we do about him?" asked Ruth.

"You don't want to see him arrested and carried to jail, do you?"

"No, my dear. But how can we help it—when this deputy sheriff manages to find a craft in which to take him away from the island?"

"I wish Nettie's Aunt Rachel were here," cried the other Northern girl.

"Even Mrs. Parsons, I fear, could not stop the law in its course."

"I don't know. She is pretty powerful," returned her chum, grinning. "See how nice they have all begun to treat us since Nettie threatened them with the terrors of her Aunt Rachel's displeasure."

"Perhaps. But I would rather they were nice to us for our own sakes," Ruth said thoughtfully. "If it were not for Nettie, and Curly and the concert we want to give for his benefit, I wouldn't care whether many of them spoke to us or not. And every time that Miggs woman is in sight she makes me feel awfully unhappy," confessed Ruth. "I don't believe I ever before disliked anybody quite so heartily as I dislike her."

"Dislike! I *hate* her!" exclaimed Helen.

"It's awful to feel so towards any human creature," Ruth went on. "And I fear that we ought to pity her, not to hate her."

"I should like to know why?" demanded Helen, in some heat.

"Mrs. Holloway told one of the ladies the particulars of Miss Miggs' coming down here, and why she is such a nervous wreck—and the lady just told me."

" 'Nervous wreck,' " scoffed Helen. "Wrecked by her ugly temper, you mean."

"She has been the sole support, and nurse as well, of a bed-ridden aunt for years. During this last term—she teaches in a big school in Bannister, Massachusetts—she had a very hard time. She has always had trouble with her girls; and evidently doesn't love them."

"Not so's you'd notice it," grumbled Helen.

"And they made her a good deal of trouble. The old aunt became more exacting toward the last, and finally Miss Miggs was up almost all night with the invalid and then was harassed in the schoolroom all day by the thoughtless girls."

"Oh, dear me, Ruthie! now you are trying to find excuses for the mean old thing."

"I'm telling you—that's all."

"Well! I don't know that I want you to tell me," sniffed Helen. "I don't feel as ugly toward that Miggs woman as I did."

"I feel very angry with her myself," Ruth said. "It is hard for me to get over anger, I am afraid."

"But you are slow to wrath. 'Beware the anger of a patient man' says—says—well, *somebody*. 'Overhaul your book and, when found, make note

of,'" giggled Helen. "Well! how did Martha get away from the aunt?"

"The aunt got away from her," said Ruth, gravely. "She died—just before the end of the term. Altogether poor Miss Miggs was 'all in,' as the saying is."

Helen sniffed again. She would not own up that she was affected by the story.

"Then," said Ruth, earnestly, "just a few days before the end of school some of her girls played a trick on the poor thing and frightened her—oh, horribly! She fell at her desk unconscious, and the girls who had played the trick ran out of the room and left her there—of course, not knowing that she had fainted. She broke her glasses, and when she came to she could not find her way about, and almost went mad. It was a very serious matter, indeed. They found her wandering about the room quite out of her mind. Mrs. Holloway had already invited her down here and sent her a ticket from Norfolk to Pee Dee, where she was to take boat again. The doctors said the trip would be the best thing for her, and they packed her off," concluded Ruth.

"Well—she's to be pitied, I suppose," said Helen, grudgingly. "But I can't fall in love with her."

"Who could? She has had a hard time, just the same. When she lost her ticket she had barely

money enough to bring her on to Pee Dee where Mrs. Holloway met her. The poor thing was worried to death. You see, all her money had been spent on the aunt, and her funeral expenses."

"Well! she's unfortunate. But she had no business to accuse us of stealing her ticket—if it was stolen at all."

"Of course somebody picked it up. But the ticket may have done nobody any good. She says she left it in the railroad folder on that seat in the steamer's saloon—you remember."

"I remember vividly," agreed Helen, "our first encounter with Miss Miggs." Then she began to laugh. "And wasn't she funny?"

" 'Not so's you'd notice it!' to quote your own classic language," said Ruth, sharply. "There was nothing funny about it."

"That is when we first saw Curly on the boat."

"Yes. He was there. But he didn't hear anything of the row, I guess. He says he had no idea we were on that boat—and we saw him three times."

"And heard him jump overboard," finished Helen. "The foolish boy."

She went away to sit by him and tell him stories. Helen was developing quite a reputation as a nurse. The boy was in pain and anything was welcome that kept his mind for a little off the troublesome leg.

The girls were very busy that evening with another matter. Permission had been asked and obtained to give the proposed "chamber concert" for Curly's benefit. What the boy had done in saving two lives was well known now among the enforced guests at Holloway's, and the idea of any entertainment was welcome.

There was a mimeograph on which the hotel menus were printed and Ruth got up a gorgeous program in two-colored ink of the "chamber concert," inviting everybody to come.

"And they've just got to come, my dears," said Nettie, who took upon herself the distribution of the concert programs and—as Helen called it—the "boning" for the money. "Ev'ry white person in this hotel has got to pay a dollar at least, fo' the pleasure of hearing Helen play and Ruth sing. That's their admission."

"I'd like to see you get a dollar for that purpose out of Miss Miggs," giggled Helen.

"Never mind, honey, somebody will have to pay fo' her," declared Nettie. "Then we'll sell the choice seats and the boxes at auction."

"Goodness, child!" cried Ruth. "What boxes do you mean; soap boxes?"

"The front stairs," said Nettie, placidly. "The seats in the upstairs hall here will be reserved, and must bring a premium, too."

"The ingenuity of the girl!" gasped Ruth.

"Why, Ruthie," said Helen, "it isn't *anything* to get up a concert, or to carry a program all alone. But it takes genius to devise such schemes as this. You will be a multi-millionairess before you die, Nettie."

"I expect to be," returned the Southern girl. "Now, listen: Each of these broad stairs will hold four people comfortably. We will letter the stairs and number the seats."

"But those on the lower step will have their feet in the water!" cried Ruth, in a gale of laughter.

"Very well. They will be nearest to the performers. You say yourselves that you will probably have to be barefooted, when you are down there singing and playing," said Nettie. "They ought to pay an extra premium for being allowed to be so near to the performers. That is 'the bald-headed row.'"

"And every bald head that sits there will have a nice cold in his head," Ruth declared.

However, Nettie had her way in every particular. The next evening the auction of "reserved seats and boxes" was held in the upper hall. Mr. Jimson officiated as auctioneer and for an hour or more the party managed to extract a great deal of wholesome fun from the affair.

The deputy sheriff was made to subscribe for the two lower tiers of seats on the stair at a good

price, because, as Mr. Jimson said, "he was the bigges' an' fattes' man in dis hyer destitute community." The other seats sold merrily. No one hesitated over paying the admission fee. There is nobody in the world as generous both in spirit and actual practice as these Southern people.

Almost two hundred dollars was raised for Curly's benefit. The concert was held the afternoon following the auctioning of the seats, and the chums covered themselves with glory.

The piano was rolled out into the hall and the negroes knocked together a platform on which Ruth and Helen could stand and play, while Nettie perched herself on the piano bench to accompany them, and kept her feet out of the water.

They sang the old glees together—all three of them, for Nettie possessed a sweet contralto voice. Ruth's ballads were appreciated to the full and Helen—although the instrument she used was so poor a one—delighted the audience with her playing.

When she softly played the old, sweet harmonies, and Ruth sang them, the applause from Curly's couch at the end of the hall to the foot of the stairs where the deputy sheriff sat with his boots in the water, was tremendous.

The concert ended with the girls standing in a row with clasped hands and for the glory of Briarwood giving the old Sweetbriar "war-cry:"

"S. B.—Ah-h-h!
S. B.—Ah-h-h!
Sound our battle-cry
Near and far!
S. B.—All!
Briarwood Hall!
Sweetbriars, do or die——
This be our battle-cry——
Briarwood Hall!
That's All!"

During all the time it had rained intermittently, and the river did not show any signs of abating. But the morning following the very successful "chamber concert," a large launch chugged up to the submerged steps of the hotel on Holloway Island. In it was Mrs. Rachel Parsons, and with her was the negro from the warehouse who had been swept down the river on the log when Mr. Jimson's bateau made its landing at the island.

Mrs. Parsons had been unable to get to Charleston after all because of washouts on the railroad, and had come back to Georgetown, heard of the marooning on the island of the pleasure party and at the first opportunity had come up the river to rescue Nettie, Ruth and Helen.

A plank was laid for Mrs. Parsons from the bow of the launch to the lower step of the flight leading to the second story of the hotel. Mrs.

Holloway came down in a flutter to meet the lady of the Big House.

Mrs. Parsons, however, had gone straight to Nettie's room and was shut in with her niece for half an hour before she had anything to say to the hotel keeper's wife, or to anybody else. Then she went first to see poor Curly, who was feverish and in much pain.

Just as Mrs. Parsons and her niece were passing down the hall they met Miss Miggs. Nettie shot the maiden lady an angry glance and moved carefully to one side.

"Is this the—the person who has circulated the false reports about Ruth and Helen?" asked Mrs. Parsons, sternly.

"No false reports, I'd have you know, ma'am!" cried Martha Miggs, "right on deck," Curly said afterwards, "to repel boarders." "I'd have you know I am just as good as you are, and I'm just as much respected in my own place," she continued. Miss Miggs' troubles and consequent nervous break had really left her in such a condition that she was not fully responsible for what she did and said.

"I have no doubt of that," said Mrs. Parsons, quietly. "But I wish to know what your meaning is in trying to injure the reputation of two young girls."

The little group had reached Curly's bedside;

but they did not notice that young invalid. Ruth had risen from her seat nervously, wishing that Nettie's Aunt Rachel had not brought the unpleasant subject to the surface again.

"I could not injure the reputation of a couple of young minxes like these!" declared Miss Miggs, angrily. "I put the ticket in the railroad folder, and laid it on the seat beside me in the steamer's saloon, and when I got up I forgot to take the folder with me. These girls were the only people in sight. They were watching me, and when my back was turned they took the ticket and folder."

"Who?" suddenly shouted a voice behind them, and before any of the party could reply to Miss Miggs' absurd accusation.

Curly was sitting up in bed, his cheeks very red and his eyes bright with fever; but he was in his right senses.

"Those girls did it!" snapped Miss Miggs.

"They didn't, either!" cried Curly. "*I* did it. Now you can have me arrested if you want to!" added the boy, falling back on his pillows. "I didn't know the ticket belonged to anybody. When I was drying my things aboard that fishing boat, I found it in a folder that I had picked up in the cabin of the steamer. I s'posed it was a ticket the railroad gave away with the folder, until I asked a railroad man if it was good, and he said it was as good as any other ticket. So I rode down to Pee

Dee on it from Norfolk. There now! If that's stealin', then I *have* stolen, and Gran is right—I'm a thief!"

Even as obstinate a person as Miss Miggs was forced to believe this story, for its truth was self-evident. It completely ended the controversy about the lost ticket; but Curly Smith was not satisfied until enough money was taken out of the fund raised for his benefit to reimburse Mrs. Holloway for the purchase-money of the ticket she had sent to her New England cousin.

"I wish, Martha, I had never invited you down here," the hotel keeper's wife was heard to tell the New England woman. "You've made me trouble enough. I will never be able to pacify Mrs. Parsons. She is going to take the young ladies and the boy away at once, and I know that she will never again give me her good word with any of her wealthy friends. Your ill-temper has cost me enough, I am sure."

Perhaps it had cost Miss Miggs a good deal, too; only Miss Miggs was the sort of obstinate person who never does or will acknowledge that he is wrong.

CHAPTER XXV

BACK HOME

Mrs. Rachel Parsons marveled at what the girls had done in raising money for Curly Smith. He would have money enough to keep him at the hospital until his leg was healed, and to spare.

Curly was not to be arrested. Deputy Sheriff Ricketts went with the party on the launch back to Georgetown, picking up his own lost launch by the way, uninjured, and saw the boy housed in a private room of the hospital. Then he, as well as Ruth, received news about Curly.

The letter from Mrs. Sadoc Smith at last arrived. In it the unhappy woman opened her heart to Ruth again and begged her to send or bring Curly home. It had been discovered that the boy had nothing to do with the robbery of the railroad station at Lumberton.

"And who didn't know that?" sniffed Helen. "Of course he didn't."

Mr. Ricketts, too, received information that called him off the case. "That there li'le Yankee boy ain't t' be arrested after all," he confessed to

Ruth. "Guess he jest got in wrong up No'th. But yo'd bettei take him back with you when you go, Miss Ruth. He needs somebody to take care of him—sho' do!"

The river subsided and the girls went back to Merredith. They spent the next fortnight delightfully and then the chums from Cheslow got ready to start home. They could not take Curly with them; but he would be sent to New York by steamer just as soon as the doctors could get him upon crutches; and eventually the boy from Lumberton returned to his grandmother, a much wiser lad than when he left her home and care.

The days at Merredith, all things considered, had been very delightful. But the weather was growing very oppressive for Northerners. Ruth and Helen bade Mrs. Parsons and Nettie and everybody about the Big House, including Mr. Jimson, good-bye and caught the train for Norfolk. They had a day to wait there, and so they went across in the ferry to Old Point Comfort, found Unc' Simmy, and were driven out to the gatehouse to see Miss Catalpa.

"And we sho' done struck luck, missy," Unc' Simmy confided to Ruth. "Kunnel Wildah done foun' some mo' money b'longin' t' Miss Catalpa, an' it's wot he calls a 'nuity. It comes reg'lar, like a man's wages," and the old darkey's smile was beautiful to see.

"Now Miss Catalpa kin have mo' of the fixin's like she's use to. Glory!"

"He is the most unselfish person I have ever met," said Ruth to Helen. "It makes me ashamed to see how he thinks only of that dear blind woman."

Miss Catalpa welcomed the chums delightedly; and they took tea with her on the vine-shaded porch of the old gatehouse, Unc' Simmy doing the honors in his ancient butler's coat. It was a very delightful party, indeed, and Helen as well as Ruth went away at last hoping that she would some time see the sweet-natured Miss Catalpa again.

Three days later Mr. Cameron's automobile deposited Ruth at the Red Mill—her arrival so soon being quite unexpected to the bent old woman rocking and sewing in the cheerful window of the farmhouse kitchen.

When Ruth ran up the steps and in at the door, Aunt Alvirah was quite startled. She dropped her sewing and rose up creakingly, with a murmured, "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!" but she reached her thin arms out to clasp her hands at the back of Ruth Fielding's neck, and looked long and earnestly into the girl's eyes.

"My pretty's growing up—she's growing up!" cried Aunt Alvirah. "She ain't a child no more. I can't scurce believe it. What have you seen down South there that's made you so old-like, honey?"

"I guess it is not age, Aunt Alvirah," declared Ruth. "Maybe I have seen some things that have made me thoughtful. And have endured some things that were hard. And had some pleasures that I never had before."

"Just the same, my pretty!" crooned the old woman. "Just as thoughtful as ever. You surely have an old head on those pretty young shoulders. Oh, yes you have."

"And maybe that isn't a good thing to have, after all—an old head on young shoulders," thought Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill the night of her return, as she sat at her little chamber window and looked out across the rolling Lumano. "Helen is happier than I am; she doesn't worry about herself or anybody else.

"Now I'm worrying about what's to happen to me. Briarwood is a thing of the past. Dear, old Briarwood Hall! Shall I ever be as happy again as I was there?

"I see college ahead of me in the fall. Of course, my expenses for several years are assured. Mr. Hammond writes me that he will take another moving picture scenario. I have found out that my voice—as well as Helen's violin playing—can be coined. I am going to be self-supporting and that, as Mrs. Parsons says, is a heap of satisfaction.

"I need trouble Uncle Jabez no more for money.

But I can't remain in idleness—that's 'agin nater,' to quote Aunt Alvirah. I know what I'll do! I'll —I'll go to bed!"

She arose from her seat with a laugh and began to disrobe. Ten minutes later, her prayers said and her hair in two neat plaits on the pillow, Ruth Fielding fell asleep.

THE END

MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY

QUIET in the kitchen,
Still as any mouse,
Not a sign of any
Children in the house.
Mother starts to fidget,
Wonders where they are,
It would not be like them
To have wandered far.
Just as she's decided
To investigate,
There's a little rustle,
Clatter of a plate.
Wide the door is opened
As the latch bar lifts,
Comes a gay procession
Bearing love and gifts;
Bearing joy and Jell-O
Smiles and love and cakes;
Jell-O made by Janey,
And what care she takes
As she brings to Mother
For her birthday treat
This dessert delicious
And such fun to eat!
Bobby follows after
With a laden dish,
Waiting for the time to
Shout a birthday wish.
'Course it doesn't matter
If he spills a few,
Can't see Mother's eyes and
Keep it level, too!
"What a happy birthday,"
Lovely Mother cries
"Smiles and cakes and Jell-O
For a big surprise!"

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